



War or Peace

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Luke 19:29-42

How should one receive a king? What expectations do we place on leaders? At what point are we willing to be led in directions that might run counter to our desires? What do we do with that interplay between being led and directing those who would lead us? How different is our attitude toward God's direction for our lives? Are we at peace with God on God's own terms?

There is a new pope in Rome. Many groups around the world were anxious about the election of this new pope. There were many questions making the rounds of the news shows and discussions in churches, homes, and meeting places the world around. Which Cardinal would be elected? Which interest group or groups would he represent? What direction would the new pope take the church? How would the new pope handle issues faced by the Catholic Church in terms of women's issues, pedophilia, and the growing scarcity of priests? Many were surprised when the first Latin American was elected pope, the first Jesuit, a man who seems to have taken a stance contrary to some of the traditional pomp and wealth associated with the office. In significant ways he doesn't seem to fit the expected mold.

By the same token, what we call Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem raised many questions in his own day. Jesus' entry was not a simple entrance into the city. His actions and acclamation by the crowds communicated a message. That message included an outward acceptance of his position as Messiah or King, God's Anointed. On that day Jesus was being acclaimed by the crowds as the one who would fulfill the roles and expectations placed upon God's anointed leader for the chosen people. They waved their palm fronds, laid clothing on the ground before him, and began asking questions about his identity as Messiah, Anointed, and King.

The crowds acclaimed him as fulfilling the expectations of Messiah. There were other voices, however, of those uncomfortable with Jesus in that role. There were various reasons for discomfort. For some it was a question of Jesus' identity and what they knew of his actions and character. For others, it was a question of anxiety or fear of the political ramifications of Messiah arriving on the scene and an expected reaction from Rome. For others, it was perhaps simply the fact that Jesus had not come through the expected channels. For others, there were concerns as to their own fate and position in some new political order Jesus might establish. Some were simply anxious in the face of the unknown, with no sense of the actual reason for their insecurities and concerns.

Doubtless, some recognized the significance of the animal on which Jesus rode—a symbol of peace. Luke records the crowds reciting from Psalm 118 on witnessing Jesus' entry. This Psalm would be recited during the Passover later that week in home celebrations throughout the city and region. Reciting the passage now, they recognized Jesus as God's legitimate king entering Jerusalem. They pictured and acclaimed him as the one God had sent for the good of the nation. They were actively placing their trust and confidence in Jesus as the one the nation had long-awaited.

Luke records these declarations of Jesus as King being tied to the many miracles and healings that Jesus had been performing in their midst. They had recognized in Jesus' actions and words God's fulfillment of promises to redeem and restore the chosen nation within their land. This was not a standard interpretation of Messiah's identity for that time, though it follows Luke's definition of Jesus' mission to bring healing, justice, reconciliation, and meet the needs of the poor and oppressed. For some Jews, such an understanding of Messiah was antithetical to their expectations and desires.

These words and definitions made some nervous. The mere mention of Jesus as a King appointed by God had the potential to rouse the Romans to respond to a perceived threat to Roman domination. Such a response could turn ugly at a moment's notice. On the other hand, the expectations of many were for Messiah to raise an army after the examples of Joshua, Gideon, or David. Jesus did not seem to foot the bill for such a military leader. He was not the kind to lead battles and overthrow an occupying force. Claiming him as king, however, held the potential to rouse the ire of Rome and bring about the deaths of many with no hope for victory in the absence of a brilliant military strategist. Acclaiming Jesus king in that context was a very dangerous thing if heard by the wrong ears. Some begged Jesus to shush the crowds. Some of these calling for quiet might even have been in support of Jesus, but afraid of Rome's reaction to the words of the multitude.

Jesus did not share these same anxieties. He had not come prepared for war. He had not come expecting war. He had no wish to lead an armed rebellion, yet neither did he fear one. He had no position to protect against any enemy at all. His purposes, plans, and strategies were wholly different from so many expectations laid out before him. He had come for peace. He had come to bring reconciliation from God, not to build animosity and posit winners against losers.

The problem was that so many had other issues in mind when they came to Jesus. Some wanted to acclaim him Messiah, but only in so far as he fulfilled their desires, ambitions, and dreams for Israel. Their political aims and ambitions got in the way of accepting him on his own terms.

Some indeed wanted a new life in which Jesus would be on call to heal the nation from all its infirmities. That was the literal wording of promises by some of the prophets. They could point to those verses and force a literal interpretational to expect nothing less from Jesus and God's Anointed One. Others simply wanted Rome forced out of power in the region. They wanted political independence, just as long as Jesus did not go on to organize some system of governance that might interfere with their economic or political preferences.

Others just did not want Jesus, or God, for that matter, to mess with the status quo. They were comfortable with knowing the rules for living and did not want anyone to make waves. They were risk averse and uncomfortable with the idea of change. Even if the reality of their circumstances was not what they really wanted, messing with the known was cause for too much uncertainty, cause for too much anxiety. They really wanted God's blessings, but they were too anxious and afraid to trust God with the details in the midst of uncertainty.

They urged quiet. They pressed for leaving things alone. They did not want a fuss, even if it meant maintaining an overtone of war looming over their heads. The known quantity was more comfortable, even if it was unproductive and painful.

Jesus wanted much more for them than the status quo. Jesus wanted to give them a new lease of life and freedom, yet they were unable to see through Jesus' eyes. He had a new way forward to offer, but they were unwilling to seek God's response to their plight. They were too afraid.

Subservient co-existence with an occupying foreign power was not the full reality of God's will for them. The experience brought Jesus to tears, for he wanted to give them so much more. They just were not willing to take the risk and trust God with a new path forward. They weren't really ready to accept Jesus on his own terms. They weren't ready to learn a new way of living. They were not a peace with God's plans. Their desires would lead them to war with God and Rome. Are we any different?

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