

## **From Glory unto Glory**

Matthew 21:1-12, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11

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Church of the New Covenant

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Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he asked for the donkey. For some time there had been a buzz about him circulating through Galilee and Judea. He was aware of the hope among the people for a messiah, that descendant of David who would lead them in their uprising to throw off the yoke of the Roman empire. Many people were asking if Jesus was the one.

He knew that the Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem were suspicious of him, that they saw him as a trouble maker.

He knew potency of the symbol in Zechariah's prophecy:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,!

Jesus anticipated the public acclamation that would arise if he invoked that symbol and rode through the city gate on a donkey.

Jesus also knew what lay ahead for him once he got inside the city. He was keenly aware of the servant prophecies in Isaiah:

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. (Is 50:6)

He was despised and rejected by all people;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised.  
(Is 53:3)

Jesus anticipated both the acclamation and the humiliation that the public would heap upon him. He had already disclosed this to the disciples, warning them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will

be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death.”

By the end of the week he would live out what Paul would declare about him years later: “Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”

By the end of the week, Jesus would be utterly spent: emptied.

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Much has been argued over the centuries about what it means that Christ “emptied himself”. If God, as Jesus, became human, did God lose the quality of omniscience? How could Jesus be someone who had to learn how to walk, talk and read and still be God who knows everything? Did God lose the quality of omnipresence? If Jesus was confined to a particular locality, could he, as God, still be everywhere? Did God lose the quality of omnipotence? If Jesus could suffer thirst, fatigue, hunger, and physical pain, how could he, as God, be all-powerful?

I don’t know the answers to any of these questions. Asking them may have some value if they give us opportunities to probe a little farther into the mystery of the Incarnation, and if they add to our appreciation of the depth of God’s love for us. But if we let ourselves get entangled in what are really just technicalities, our attention shifts from the heart to the head, from lived experience to mere semantics. Instead of wide-eyed wonder, we stand with stern, narrowed eyes, all but blind to what Christ so freely gives. In our effort to refine a point, we miss the point.

So I find myself standing with the psalmist who said, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high: I cannot attain it” (Ps 139). The power of the Gospel is not in knowledge. It is in its mystery. The Gospel reaches beyond what I can know absolutely to invite me into the revelation that I am loved absolutely.

Christ emptied himself.

As we look beyond this festive day, after the crowds disperse, after the cheers die away and the twilight falls on the trampled palm leaves in the

streets, we must stay with the story and follow it – that is, follow *Christ* through what happens next.

We might be tempted at this point to say, “The rest is history,” and run on ahead to Easter. But Easter means nothing. Nothing – unless we deepen our appreciation of what it cost.

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

Matthew tells us that the entire city of Jerusalem was in turmoil when Jesus entered in. This did not sit well with the Jewish religious authorities: the scribes, the chief priests and the Pharisees. They feared Jesus’ influence over the people, for he was challenging their credibility and their authority. Furthermore, all this talk about him being a king and ascribing to him the messianic title “son of David” --in a demonstration as noisy as this -- would be certain to attract the attention of the Roman civil authorities and bring on brutal repercussions. So they plotted to arrest him and hand him over to the Romans to be put to death.

Christ emptied himself.

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“Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to ...” and here we have a tough time coming up with an exact translation of a particular word. RSV: “He did not regard equality with God a thing to be *grasped*.” KJV: “[He] thought it not *robbery* to be equal with God.” Our edition (NRSV) says “[he] did not regard equality with God as something *to be exploited*.” I have preferred to say “cling to”, which, now I see, is rather wimpy. But the Greek word is very strong, and the King James, as curious as “robbery” sounds, is closer to the mark. The word means seize or steal. “Christ did not regard equality with God something to *seize*.”

So this poetic affirmation tells us something about the cost of Christ’s entry into the human condition. It is not a choice between simply holding something and letting go. Christ could *seize* his God-ness, that is, clamp onto it with extreme tenacity. Instead, in deep anguish, he chooses to pour it out. He empties himself.

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There is a Tibetan Buddhist practice of creating a mandala out of colored sand. A mandala is a guide for meditation in the form of an ornate circle that contains symbols representing the universe and the deities that care for it.

Recently at Lehigh University, my alma mater, a group of Tibetan monks labored for five days to create a very beautiful mandala. With painstaking placement of colored sand, they depicted flowers, urns, serpents, deities, temples, flowing ribbons, all manner of patterns and designs, all in vibrant colors. Like a hand-woven Asian carpet, it was perfectly executed.

“And then, in a dissolution ceremony illustrating the impermanence of life, they dismantled the mandala, brushing the millions of grains of brilliantly colored sand into a pile, scooping them up by hand, and pouring them into a glass urn. The urn was then transported to [the other side of the city], where the monks released the sand into the flowing Lehigh River to symbolize the kindness and compassion of the deity being released into the world for the benefit of all [humankind].” (*Lehigh Alumni Bulletin*, Winter 2008, p 28)

Christ empties himself into the world.

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“He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

From the cross he cried out:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

The psalm from which that cry comes goes on to say,

All who see me mock at me,  
they make mouths at me, they wag their heads:  
"He committed his cause to the Lord; let God deliver him!"

I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax,  
it is melted within my breast. (Ps 22)

Christ's very lifeblood pours out from the cross. Christ empties himself.

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There is a brief poem, sung as a bass aria in Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, following the account of Jesus' death. The strings play what sounds like a waltz; but the listener soon realizes it is a lullaby, and the rhythm is Mary holding her son and rocking him.

The soloist sings,

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| Mache dich, mein Herze, rein,<br>ich will Jesum selbst begraben.<br>Denn er soll nunmehr in mir für und für<br>seine süße Ruhe haben. | Make thee pure, O heart of mine,<br>I will bury Jesus in my very self.<br>For he shall henceforth evermore<br>sweetly take his rest in me. |
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As we enter the holiest days of the Christian calendar this week, we are invited to empty ourselves also, like this poet who would make his heart a purified sepulchre where Christ may be laid to rest. We are being called to walk with Christ beyond the hosannas, beyond the tumult of the palm-strewn streets, through to the other side of the city, to the garbage heap called Golgotha, where Christ empties himself, pouring out everything he has, everything he is, in order to convey to us the full magnitude of the love of God.