

HOW TO MAKE AN ENTRANCE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Philippians 2:5-11

Have you ever watched a fashion show? The models wearing the clothes don't walk like normal people, do they? They don't stroll, saunter, or amble. They take these long strides, focused on their objective. They have purpose. They project strength. They know how to make an entrance. When they start down the catwalk, they demand that you look at them. That's their job.

There are plenty of articles available about how to make an entrance. These are mostly written from a business perspective. If you are a businessperson entering a room, you want to make an impression and you want to make an entrance. You want to project confidence. Take a cue from fashion models. Look like you own the place.

One professor of psychology offers some substantive advice on how to make a powerful entrance such as match your entrance to the situation. Don't overdo it. Scan the room and make eye contact with the people. Look like you're glad to be there.

Again, this is all about power. It is about establishing oneself.

About 1300 years before the time of Jesus, the Israelites lived as slaves in Egypt. With assistance from God, Moses led the people out of Egypt and toward freedom to a land that God promised them. On the night before their escape from Egypt, the spirit of the Lord covered the land and struck down each first born in the land. The Jews who had marked the doors of their homes with lamb's blood were spared. It is said that the Lord 'passed over' them. Passover celebrates the people's liberation by God from slavery in Egypt.

It was this same Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples at a meal 1300 years later. As Christians, we call this event the Last Supper.

In Jesus' day, Passover¹ was a festival of great significance. Each year, thousands of pilgrims streamed into Jerusalem for a week-long celebration. This concentration of people made the Roman authorities nervous. They mustered extra troops to quash any potential Jewish revolt or uprising that might take place during this festival. Passover was a powder keg of politics and emotions. The Jews chafed under the Roman occupation as they converged on Jerusalem to commemorate a past act of freedom from foreign oppression. The Romans knew that anything could

¹ Pasesch

happen. It is into this mix of nationalism and religious fervor that Jesus arrives. As Christians, we call it Palm Sunday.

Jesus and his followers traveled to Jerusalem to observe the Passover feast. Prior to their arrival to Jerusalem, Jesus dispatched two of his disciples to enter a village and obtain a donkey. They bring the donkey to Jesus who then rides it into Jerusalem.

Now, at this point in the day, Jesus and his group of disciples and followers are merely a subset of the multitude of pilgrims streaming toward the capital. But riding on the donkey, Jesus attracts attention. The sight of him on the donkey ignites the theological imaginations of the crowd. They recognize the image. They recall the ancient prophecy of Zechariah: *Your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey* (9:9).

Do the crowds believe that Jesus really is their king? I doubt it. But in the spirit of the Passover festival, they cheer when they see this man riding on the humble beast.

Imagine a Fourth of July parade. There are people lining the streets watching bands and floats go by. In the middle of the parade walks a man dressed up like George Washington. As he passes, people cheer and clap. They shout things like “liberty” and “God bless America.” Does anyone believe that this man is actually George Washington? No. But they recognize the image and all that it represents, and they cheer.

That crowd of pilgrims headed for Jerusalem—they get it, too. And they respond shouting, *Hosanna. Blessed is the one comes in the name of the Lord* (Ps. 118), The ‘hosanna’ literally means “save now.” The people then join into the drama by creating a royal path for their king. They lay down leafy branches and palms to pave the royal highway.

So, what we find here is a throng of pilgrims marching into Jerusalem. In the midst of that crowd are Jesus’ disciples with Jesus himself riding on a donkey. The sight of the man on the donkey inspires the crowd to respond as they would to their king.

But why a donkey? Couldn’t Jesus find something more impressive, more regal, more intimidating? The obvious explanation is because a donkey is referenced in the passage from Zechariah. *Lo, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey.*

The Jewish people yearned for a king—a savior—who would deliver them from the oppressive rule of the Roman invaders. And now they searched for someone who could lead them back to freedom. I believe Jesus chose to make his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey because of the message it would send about who he was. He

was king, but not that sort of king. He wasn't a warrior king or a political king. Those kings would certainly arrive at the capital with the trappings and displays of power. Not alone on a donkey. Jesus is king of a different kingdom.

In 1977, January 20 was a cold, icy day in Washington D.C. The temperature was 28°F and the wind chill brought that down to the teens.² On this day, James Earl Carter, Jr.—Jimmy Carter—former governor of the state of Georgia, was inaugurated as the 39th president of the United States. As president, Carter followed Gerald Ford who had been named vice-president when Spiro Agnew resigned. He then became president when Richard Nixon stepped down. After being sworn in at the Capitol, Carter did something no president had done before. He walked. Instead of riding in a carriage or a limousine as many presidents had done before him, Carter chose to walk the mile-and-a-half from the Capitol to the White House. Carter wrote in his diary that by walking he wished to convey “a reduction in the imperial status of the president and his family.” If Jimmy Carter had ridden in a large limo marked with the seal of the presidency and adorned with American flags, no one would have thought anything of it. That was the norm. But by walking the parade route—down Pennsylvania Avenue—waving at people and shaking hands, he sent a message. He was reminding the nation that we are a democracy, that the president is not above the people; that the president is one of the people.

Jesus, by making his entrance into the capital on a donkey, is proclaiming that he is not a king of power but a person of humility. *Lo, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey.*

Let's ponder this: What if, instead of a donkey, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a war horse? What would have happened when he got to Jerusalem? Likely, given the tense political environment, it possibly could have sparked a rebellion—assuming that the Romans didn't kill him on sight. Such a powerful symbol during this festival when the city was packed with believers could have created a wave of rebellion. History would be different.

But by riding a donkey, Jesus makes a different entrance; he declares a kingship of humility, not power.

Our reading for today is from Paul's Letter to the church in the city of Philippi. Paul is writing this letter from prison.

In the letter, Paul is urging the people to live their lives *worthy of the gospel of Christ* (1:27). To do this, he says, they must live in humility.

Humility is a strange concept. We tend to associate it with weakness. If you are weak, you must be humble. If you are strong, let everyone know your power; don't

² https://www.weather.gov/lwx/events_Inauguration

hide it. Paul defines humility like this: he says, *In humility regard others as better than yourselves* (2:3). Humility is not pulling yourself down; humility is lifting others up. As Paul writes, *Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others* (2:4). The humble person is the one who lifts up others and always considers their needs.

Paul shows us that living in Christ means living in humility. It means using our power not to push others aside, but to lift others up. To live in humility is not to draw attention to ourselves but rather to shine a light on our neighbor.

Paul calls on the people in Philippi to imitate Jesus. He says, be of the *same mind that was in Christ Jesus*. Paul calls them to have a Christ-mindedness, to live in Christ. Paul then incorporates the lyrics of a contemporary song to make his point. Today, we refer to this song as the Christ Hymn.

This song has three sections. The first describes how Jesus emptied himself. We read, *[Jesus] was in the form of God, however, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*. Here, we are reminded that Christ has the power of God. He is God. Yet, he chooses not to exploit this power but instead chooses to become human. He humbles himself. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he could have stormed in with guns blazing accompanied by the armies of heaven. That would have been an impressive display of power and strength, but it would not have lifted anyone up.

In the second section of this hymn, we read of how Jesus, in human form, *humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—crucifixion*. Humility has its consequences. Christ wasn't defeated. He sacrificed himself for others, for us. What could be stronger than that?

And so, in the third section, we read how God has exalted Jesus lifting up the name of Jesus above all names. Christ is triumphant not because of his great power but because of his great sacrifice.

In this season of Lent and Easter, we know the cross is ahead of us. It is the Christian symbol of the greatest sacrifice. In life, Christ did not exploit his power as he could easily have done. Instead, he offered himself as a model of obedience to God; he put the needs of the world before himself. In this Holy Week, let us practice being Christ-followers in all that we do. Let us be Christ-minded. Let us make every entrance one of humility.

Amen.