

Undeclared by Humility

Luke 19:28-40 (NIV)

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here." ³¹ If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" say, "The Lord needs it." ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They replied, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" ⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

In 1901, then Vice-President of the United States of America, Theodore Roosevelt, outlined his ideal foreign policy: "Speak softly, and carry a big stick; you will go far." It was a policy of carefully mediated negotiation (speaking softly) supported by the unspoken threat of a powerful military (the big stick). His policy, which defined his administration when he became president, was nicknamed "Big Stick Diplomacy." And that worked pretty well, right?

But is that the best policy, the one that always wins? What was Jesus' policy? Did he only speak softly but always had an unspoken threat of power against his enemies?

Last week there was no soft speaking. Jesus bluntly told his enemies that they would be crushed and broken to pieces by him, the stone that they had rejected, the Son that they were plotting to throw outside and kill. The chief priests and the experts in the law knew that this was spoken against them, that they would bring about their own destruction. But their sinful impulsiveness quickly moved them to try to whip out a big stick of their own and crush Jesus first before he could crush them.

This week on Palm Sunday, we see something other than Big Stick Diplomacy. First, Jesus has two of his disciples go on ahead of him to get a colt, the foal of a donkey. Isn't it interesting that for his transportation into Jerusalem, Jesus doesn't buy the colt? He doesn't conjure one up, as we know God could do. And he doesn't Jedi mind trick the owners into giving it to him. Instead, he relies on his disciples to find this colt, tell the owners that the Lord needs it, and for the owners to be good with that and let them have it.

On top of that, Jesus picks a colt, a young donkey that has never been ridden, that has not been broken in. This is not a war horse. It isn't decked out in armor. It isn't an animal of power or prestige; it's a beast of burden, of peace. Jesus didn't come with an army of followers armored up and carrying swords. No, they had palm branches and cloaks. Yet this is what he rides into Jerusalem on as a conquering King who has yet to win the war. Still, the people go on ahead spreading their cloaks on the road for Jesus, joyfully praising God that the King has arrived and brought "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (verse 38)

When the Pharisees saw this, they were appalled. They scolded Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" (verse 30) Give them harsh, stern words. Get them to stop this praise of you. Yet Jesus replied, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (verse 40) He rides in without violence or armor or power or anger or wrath. He doesn't smite his enemies, but simply tells them that if we quiet these people, something else in nature, the stones even, will cry out in praise. There is only humility as Christ comes riding in, but the anger and resentment of the Pharisees remain.

Does this seem like a good diplomacy – a policy of humility? Jesus isn't coming in with a show of force, armed to the teeth. I mean, if a king wants to conquer an enemy, he isn't going to leave his army at home. He isn't going to leave his armor, his weapons, his advantages somewhere else. What victory is it for a king to come straight to his enemies and hand himself over with no outside help, no sabotage, no trickery? Where is the power to back up your kingly entrance? Where's your big stick? Even with humility, with a calm answer, the Pharisees were still mad at Jesus. They still refused to be gathered to him. You can't win with humility.

At least that's how we approach it, don't we? We feel like we need all the weapons, all the power, all the force before we can go into battle and win. We think that we need to be something or someone great in order to take on our enemies, especially when they're big and powerful. We need to build ourselves up to win. This is why we yell when we want our way, when we want to put someone in their place. We whip out the big stick, the show of force, to win. This is why we comfort ourselves in our minds with

what we could do and what we could say about someone when they wrong us. We'll speak softly while carrying the big stick. If we wielded humility, we should plan on being walked all over and losing everything.

So many times throughout these UNDEFEATED messages, we have seen God turn our concept of defeat and victory upside down. Here he does it again. On Palm Sunday, Jesus came to be the kind of King the world will never understand: one who conquers his enemies by surrendering to them, one who crushes his opposition by letting it crush him, one whose path to kingly exaltation includes willing humiliation, one who leaves the big stick at home and never silently threatens to use it in order to accomplish his mission to save the world. Jesus isn't defeated by humility, but uses humility to win the war.

Talking with a fellow brother in Christ this last weekend, he told me that as he was sharing his faith with one of his coworkers, the coworker said that he couldn't believe in Christianity because all Christians are simple-minded. Our brother in Christ was hurt by this statement, this attack, and thought about it. He didn't whip out the big stick and insult the man for calling him simple-minded. Instead, in humility, he took a couple of days and then re-engaged his coworker and basically told him, "Yes, it doesn't take a great mind to get Christianity, to be a Christian. It's actually a message for all, regardless of how high your IQ is."

There's humility to that answer, an admission that I am simple-minded to believe that Jesus did everything for me, that he didn't make this great show of power to conquer all our enemies in our lives, that he didn't bust out the big stick, that I don't have to make a great show of power to win in this world, to cause people to believe in my God. It takes great yet simple faith to see Jesus riding to Jerusalem in humility, seemingly powerless, as the One, the One who holds all the power, who is completely in control of the upcoming battle of good and evil.

As Zechariah prophesied hundreds of years earlier, this is the kind of King we have: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) Paul described the mindset of Christ the humble King in Philippians chapter 2: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus does not speak softly while carrying a big stick. He comes with humility. He isn't defeated by it but instead turns the world upside down with it. He walks right into his enemies' hands without an army, without armor, without a war horse. He allows them to arrest him, shackle him, torture him, subvert justice, but he's not defeated. This is how he wins. This is how he wins us.

Jesus comes in humility to take our place. He takes the sentence for our sins, not for his because he has none. He has the big stick, power over everything, but doesn't use it to his advantage, doesn't threaten with it. He is not defeated by humility, but uses humility to defeat sin, death, and the devil. And so we too praise him with palm branches and songs knowing that he is our victorious and humble King.

At times, we look pretty humble as the Church, believing that this humble King is the King of Kings, the God of all. Maybe we don't look big and powerful. We don't live using Big Stick Diplomacy. Instead, we believe God used humility to save us. Humility is not defeat. Jesus our King rides forth in that humility, and he rides forth undefeated. By his humility, we too are undefeated. Amen.