

One of the most familiar pictures on American TV screens is that of the president of the United States walking across the South Lawn of the White House to board Marine One, his white-topped VH-3D helicopter, for the quick trip out to Andrews Air Force Base to rendezvous with Air Force One, “the flying White House.” It all looks so impressive, from the Marine guard’s salute to the famous light-blue plane taxiing down the runway.

It’s what we don’t see that’s even more impressive, however. Getting the president from place to place is a bit like planning the Normandy invasion: It involves hundreds of man-hours and millions of dollars and tons of hardware, making your last plane trip look like a cakewalk by comparison.

There are actually two identical VC-25s that can serve as Air Force One (an aircraft is called Air Force One only if the president is actually on board). Both planes are often flown to destinations so there’s always a backup. Accompanying them are at least two massive Air Force C-5 cargo planes that contain the armored presidential limousines (a primary and a decoy) and accompanying support vehicles for a motorcade, including a fully stocked ambulance. Sometimes, the presidential helicopter (Marine One) and other auxiliary aircraft are also ferried to a long-distance location on one of the cargo planes. The cargo planes land well in advance of Air Force One to begin assembling and staging all the necessary vehicles to be ready the second the president steps off the plane.

When Air Force One rolls to a stop on the tarmac at the local airport or airbase, the president gets into one of the armored limousines, the motorcade moves quickly on a designated route accompanied by Secret Service and local law-enforcement vehicles and helicopters. Often the route is changed at the last minute to thwart potential ambushers. Arriving at the venue, the president’s personal Secret Service detail sets up a perimeter before the president emerges and,

perhaps, waves to the crowd. He is then quickly whisked through an alternate entrance and into a secure holding area before the speech. All this is planned down to the second. The speech is the easy part.

Now if it takes all that for the president of the United States just to go make a speech, what did it look like for the King of Kings, God's chosen ruler of the whole world, to make his grand entrance at the beginning of the most important week the world has ever known? Luke and the other gospel writers give us a window into the travel arrangements that were needed when Jesus came into Jerusalem and into an environment that was anything but secure.

First, there's *the reason for the trip in the first place*. Presidents usually go where they're invited to make a speech or attend a meeting. Jesus received no invitation to come to Jerusalem. No summit meeting was scheduled with the temple officials, who had no doubt heard about Jesus' teaching and healing. No town-hall meeting was set up with the Pharisees and Sadducees on the pressing issues of Torah and purity practice that Jesus had controversially circumvented or modified. No one had put together a press conference about his most recent activity in Jericho, where he healed a blind beggar and ate with a known tax collector (Luke 18:35–19:10). Like Air Force One flying the President into Baghdad unannounced on Thanksgiving 2003 to have dinner with the troops, Jesus shows up quite unexpectedly.

But Jesus knew all along that he would need to make the trip. In Luke 18:31, Jesus tells his disciples, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished." He goes on to predict his death and resurrection for the third time, but even his own cabinet of disciples do not understand the plan (18:34).

Then there was *his mode of transport*. In the first-century Roman world, emperors always made their arrival in a city with a great deal of pomp and circumstance. Elite troops carried Roman standards — the equivalent of big, bold letters on a plane. The emperor himself entered

the city riding on a warhorse, the ancient forerunner of a jet, or in a chariot, which acted like an ancient armored limo.

Jesus, however, eschews the decorations and instead has a donkey commissioned as his royal mode of transport. And it isn't even a full-grown donkey; it's a "colt" (Matthew 21:2 adds the donkey detail) — four spindly legs vs. the powerful hooves of a horse or a quarter million pounds of thrust in a VC-25. Jesus does have the disciples act a little like a first-century messianic Secret Service when they go to pick up this diminutive donkey, giving a kind of secret code word: "The Lord needs it" (Luke 19:34).

A young donkey with a large passenger struggling down the steep road that leads from the Mount of Olives to the eastern gate of Jerusalem may seem a little ridiculous to us, compared to white-topped helicopters and jumbo jets. But to the people gathering around to watch Jesus' arrival, the mode of transport was perhaps even more symbolic than Air Force One is to us. Jesus was making a very specific political statement and messianic claim, echoing the prophet's imagery in Zechariah 9:9. Instead of a display of power and might with armed security and fighter escorts, this King comes in "humble and riding on a donkey."

And *what about the crowd?* The crowd accompanying Jesus was as modest as his conveyance — a ragtag collection of disciples and hangers-on spreading their cloaks in the road, which was the ancient equivalent of rolling out a red carpet. This wasn't an ordinary king, promoting his own glory and flaunting his symbols of power, but a fisher king, a king for fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, demoniacs and cripples. Many of these people probably wouldn't have passed a Secret Service screening, but they nonetheless lined the road for the approaching donkey-cade, shouting a messianic campaign slogan, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" (v. 38 — adapted from Psalm 118:26).

The religious elite certainly understood what Jesus was doing by arriving in the city this way, unannounced and unauthorized. Rather than joining the cheering supporters, they stage a protest (v. 39). Eventually they will realize that this would-be king's security detail was pretty weak, and they would make sure that Jesus left the city on their terms, wanting him to stagger, not swagger, carrying a symbol of defeat and death.

Of course, we know that a week later, Jesus will make another unannounced arrival for which no one was prepared, making an empty tomb the focal point of all human history. Presidents and their planes will come and go, but, because of Easter, there is only one eternal King for whom the world waits in anticipation.

Palm Sunday is a great time *to assess our preparation for the King's arrival*, not only in our individual hearts but also in eschatological terms. Speculating on the mode of transport for Jesus' return, be it surfing on a cloud or riding a celestial steed à la the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation, is an exercise that some Christians have made into a booming theological business. We have to remember, though, that the King arrived the first time humbly, being born in a manger, and then began his inauguration week by riding into a city on a laughable little donkey.

If our King comes to us so gently and humbly, how might we prepare for his return by following his example? Would we be prepared? If Jesus were to arrive at St. Andrew's this Sunday, how would we welcome him? With what stories would we regale him? With what songs and shouts would we praise him? What would we be proud to show him (or ashamed to show him)? Would we recognize him for who he is or, like the religious leaders, would we mistake him for someone else because his humility doesn't fit the paradigm of a leader? How would we roll out the red carpet for the King?

We know the King is coming soon, so why not stage a rehearsal?