

## JESUS AND HIS CITY

### Mark 11:1-11

Today is Palm Sunday, the first day of what is usually called Holy Week, in which we commemorate the events of the last week of Jesus's ministry before His crucifixion and resurrection. We call today Palm Sunday because the crowds covered the road with palm branches as Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. One of the rare occasions when he was acclaimed by the crowds. This triumphal entry is one of the few events in the life of Jesus which is recorded in all four gospels and, to some extent, we'll also be referring to these parallel accounts today to give us additional material and insights to inform us as to what happened. Now, as we study today's reading together, you can find the main text in your Bible – Mark 11:1-11, but you'll need to refer to other scripture as well.

Jesus carefully arranged the manner of his entry into Jerusalem, look at verses 1-3:

“1 ¶ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'”  
(verses 1-3)

Now the road into Jerusalem from Jericho, the road from the East, came over the shoulder of the Mount of Olives – a hill rising over 800 metres above sea level and stretching from North to South on the East side of Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives looked across the Kidron valley to Jerusalem. Bethphage was a small village on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, probably about a mile from the city walls, somewhat nearer to Jerusalem than another village, Bethany, which was about two miles away. Bethphage represented the outer limits of what was called 'greater Jerusalem' which marked the limits within

which items for the Temple could be prepared or used. Greater Jerusalem also marked the limits for the purposes of accommodating the huge crowds which came to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. So many pilgrims came for this feast that they could not be accommodated within the city walls, and since, as Jewish tradition tells us, it was compulsory to remain within Jerusalem during the feast, many stayed on the surrounding hills within what was called greater Jerusalem.

Jesus then sent two of his disciples to bring him the colt of a donkey. In the parallel passage in his gospel, Matthew speaks of the disciples being sent to bring both a donkey and its colt (Matthew 21:2).

Whether one or two animals were involved, I believe that this was probably a pre-arranged provision, most likely with a local supporter of Jesus, as the words the disciples are told to say – “the Lord needs them” – seem to represent a pre-arranged password rather than an explanation which would have persuaded villagers to hand over two valuable animals to unknown strangers.

The description of the colt as one which had never been ridden (verse 2) , is highly significant in the light of the ancient provision that an animal which is to be devoted to a sacred purpose must be one which has never been put to ordinary use (see Numbers 19:2; Deuteronomy 21:3; 1 Samuel 6:7). This emphasises the appropriateness of the colt for the task of carrying Jesus and characterises the action Jesus is about to perform of entering Jerusalem on this colt as being a symbolic action of profound Messianic significance.

The fact that the colt is tied is also significant. Look at verses 4-6: “4 They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, 5 some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" 6 They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.” (verses 4-6)

The fact that the colt was tied is surely a reference to Genesis 49:11, which is part of the oracle of Judah pronounced over Judah by his father Jacob in Genesis 49:8-12:

“8 ¶ "Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. 9 You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness— who dares to rouse him? 10 The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. 11 He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. 12 His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk.” (Genesis 49:8-12 NIV)

This surely confirms the Messianic nature of the colt and also indicates that the untying of the colt was a Messianic sign, even though it was not recognised as such at the time, although the way in which Mark composed and arranged verses 1-6 may have presupposed this understanding. The fact that Jesus arranged events so as to project himself clearly in a messianic role makes it clear once again that he did not come to Jerusalem as a helpless hapless victim, but in full knowledge of what would happen to him there.

Let's move on to look at verse 7:

“7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. (verse 7)

This is the first time in the Bible that we have heard of Jesus riding on any kind of animal. The following verses and the account in Matthew's gospel all make it clear that Jesus did indeed ride into Jerusalem on the donkey. His decision to ride the last mile or so into Jerusalem after having walked more than 100 miles from Caesarea Philippi can hardly have been physical necessity and it's even more remarkable as pilgrims were expected to enter Jerusalem on foot as a matter of Jewish tradition.

Mark does not give us a reason for this, but we do find the reason in Matthew's gospel:

“This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and

riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.” (Matthew 21: 4-7 NIV)

To us a donkey is an object of fun, but in Biblical times it was the mount of a king. The reference to the prophet in verses 4 and 5 of Matthew’s gospel is to Zechariah 9:9, and although the words used do not exactly conform either to the Hebrew scripture or its translation into Greek (known as the Septuagint), they do convey the same meaning. This passage is based on King David’s return to Jerusalem after Absalom’s rebellion. The riding on the colt of a donkey echoes King Solomon’s riding to enthronement in 1 Kings 1: 38-40 where we’re told Solomon was riding on King David’s mule. We see that Jesus has not come to slip quietly into Jerusalem. A pilgrim riding amongst all those on foot could hardly fail to be noticed. He is now publicly taking up and announcing his Messianic role – his Messianic claim must now be presented in the capital city of Jerusalem. His time has indeed come.

But in deliberately presenting himself before Jerusalem as its messianic king, Jesus has chosen an OT model which denies any popular militaristic idea of kingship. The meek, peaceful donkey-rider of Zechariah 9:9 is not a potential leader of an anti-Roman rebellion. Earlier, in Mark 10:42-45 Jesus has spoken of a servant style of leadership, a type of leadership which is completely opposed to the world’s notions of kingship and authority, and now he models this style of Messiahship in the “meekness” of his royal procession to the city. Mark’s quiet account deliberately emphasises this. Like Solomon Jesus will not be a warrior king – such a king would have entered Jerusalem on a horse, an animal symbolic of war.

Let’s move on to look at verses 8-10:

“8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in

the name of the Lord!" 10 "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!" (verses 8-10)

Mark rather plays down the size of the crowd. The other gospel accounts make it clear that it was a very large crowd. The crowd's response to Jesus's Messianic gestures is overwhelmingly enthusiastic – they spread their cloaks on the road and spread branches they had cut. This is all reminiscent of the customary way of treating a king. John's gospel makes it clear that the branches were palm branches – hence our modern name Palm Sunday. The crowd continued to welcome Jesus by greeting him with shouts from the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113 – 118, which were Psalms used to greet pilgrims during festivals, especially the Passover. One really significant element of these Psalms was from Psalm 118 and verse 22 “the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” Of course the stone the Jewish leaders were about to finally reject was Jesus. Also the Psalms cry out to God – Hosanna. By Jesus's time the shout “Hosanna” – which is actually two words in Hebrew “*Hosha' na*” – had become a greeting: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” Literally though it was a prayer for help - “Please save us”. How incredibly relevant and prophetic that literal prayer for help was in terms of what Jesus was about to do for us all on the cross.

But the form which the greeting had taken on could also be seen as having messianic relevance in terms of Genesis 49:10 that we looked at earlier. But, there seems to have been no awareness amongst the crowd greeting Jesus that the time of fulfilment of the promises was at hand and had drawn near in the person of Jesus himself.

Let's now look at the final verse of our reading – verse 11:

“Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.” (verse 11)

Once Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd seems to have quickly dispersed. Of course, it was late, as Jesus had travelled some 18 miles from Jericho climbing all the way. Jericho is some 258 metres below

sea level, and as we've already noted the Mount of Olives is more than 800 metres above sea level. Jesus entered the Jerusalem temple briefly and 'sized it up'. This Temple was not the dwelling place for God's son. The era of Jewish Temple worship would soon come to an end.

After visiting the temple, Jesus withdrew to Bethany in the company of the 12 disciples, as he would do each evening until the evening of the Last Supper. It's a quiet ending to our reading, but it's the calm before the storm. Jesus well knew that crucifixion on a Roman cross awaited him in his city, the holy city of Jerusalem, at the end of this final week.

Thank God that Jesus was sent by our Father God and that he voluntarily went to that cross to die for the forgiveness of our sins and reconcile us to the Father. Thank God that he answered the true plea of the crowd that first Palm Sunday nearly 2,000 years ago, the crowd which cried Hosha na – "Please save us". We need to fully accept Jesus, the stone that the builders rejected. We need to follow that man on the donkey all the way to the cross. Thank God for our wonderful saviour – let's all turn to him in repentance and with true saving faith in his death and resurrection which have given us the forgiveness of our sins.