

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY OF JESUS

Matthew 21:1-11

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, as the parallel account from John's Gospel (John 12:13) tells us. Our account only speaks of branches of trees being used (see verse 8 of our reading). This is one of the rare occasions when we read of Jesus being acclaimed by the crowds, in strong contrast with the crowd who would call for his crucifixion in a few days time. Note that juxtaposition or contrast is an important theme of this passage.

This triumphal entry is one of the few events in the life of Jesus which is recorded in all four gospels and we'll also be referring to these parallel accounts today, as indeed we have already, to give us additional material and insights to inform us about what happened. Now, as we study today's reading together, you can find the main text on page [***] of the pew Bibles and almost all the other scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

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

“As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” (Matthew 21:1-3 NIV)

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 a donkey and its colt. 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.

In Mark’s parallel account (Mark 11:2), the description of the colt as one which had never been ridden is highly significant in the light of the ancient requirement 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 was about to perform of entering Jerusalem on this colt, as being a symbolic action of profound Messianic significance.

The fact that the colt was tied as we see in verse 2 of our reading, is also significant. This 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:

“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. 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? 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. 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. His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk." (Genesis 49:8-12 NIV)

This is a confirmation of the Messianic nature of the colt, and also indicates that the untying of the colt was a Messianic sign, even though it was probably not recognised as such at the time; although the order of Mark's arrangement of the events of verses 1-6 of his gospel might indicate such an understanding. The fact that Jesus had arranged events so as to project himself clearly in a Messianic role tells us once again that Jesus 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 verses 4-7 of our reading:

"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)

This is the first time in the Bible that we have heard of Jesus riding on any kind of animal. I think Matthew makes it quite clear that Jesus intended to 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 in view of the Jewish tradition that pilgrims were expected to enter Jerusalem on foot.

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 our reading is to Zechariah 9:9:

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle

and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9 NIV)

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 also 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:

“So Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, Benaiah son of Jehoiada, the Kerethites and the Pelethites went down and put Solomon on King David’s mule and escorted him to Gihon. Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound.” (1 Kings 1:38-40 NIV)

We see that Jesus had not come to slip quietly into Jerusalem. A pilgrim riding amongst all those on foot could hardly fail to be noticed. He was now publicly taking up and announcing his Messianic role – his Messianic claim must now be presented in the capital city of Jerusalem. His time had indeed come.

But in deliberately presenting himself before Jerusalem as its Messianic King, Jesus had chosen an OT model which denied any popular militaristic idea of kingship. The meek, peaceful donkey-rider of Zechariah 9:9 was not a potential leader of an anti-Roman rebellion. Prior to Mark’s parallel account (see Mark chapter 11), in Mark 10:42-45 Jesus had spoken of a servant style of leadership, a type of leadership which is completely opposed to the world’s notions of kingship and authority:

“Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and

whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45 NIV)

This was a real juxtaposition of leadership models.

Jesus modelled this style of Messiahship in the “meekness” of his royal procession to the city. The “quietness and simplicity” of both Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts deliberately emphasise this. Like Solomon, Jesus would 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 8-9 of our reading:

“A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest!”” (Matthew 21:8-9 NIV)

Jesus did not try and silence the crowd’s acclamation of him as Messiah, the time of the secret Messiah was over. Jesus’s time had come. Our account says there was a very large crowd. Indeed many of these would probably have followed him from Jericho as we learn from chapter 20 and verse 29 of Matthew’s gospel:

“As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.” (Matthew 20:29 NIV)

For some reason Mark’s account in chapter 11 and verse 8 rather plays down the size of the crowd. The crowd’s response to Jesus’s Messianic gestures was 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. As we’ve already seen, John’s gospel alone makes it clear that the branches were palm branches (John 12:13). Hence our modern name for this day – Palm Sunday. This is significant because palm branches were traditionally used to welcome kings and conquerors.

Although we usually entitle this passage the ‘Triumphal Entry’ and the crowd did give Jesus a Royal Acclamation as he was approaching

Jerusalem, but they seem to have disappeared or dispersed as Jesus entered the city. Our reading today does not specifically apply the words 'king' or 'kingship' to Jesus (as the other three gospels do), but Mathew's quote from Zechariah "... your king is coming to you.." makes Jesus's Royal nature quite clear.

The crowd continued to welcome Jesus by greeting him with shouts from the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113 – 118. These Psalms were used to greet pilgrims during festivals, especially the Passover and were also Psalms that were sung during the Passover meal. One really significant element of these Psalms for this event is 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, in Hebrew it was a prayer for help - "Please save us". How incredibly relevant and prophetic that literal prayer for salvation was in terms of what Jesus was about to do for us all on the cross.

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 look at the final two verses of our reading – verses 10 and 11: "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:10-11 NIV)

Again the lack of understanding of who and what Jesus was is made completely clear. Jesus was far more than a prophet, he was the Messiah, the Son of God, who had indeed come to Jerusalem to fulfil the 'Hosanah' shouts of the crowd by saving us all. Another juxtaposition. Jesus had come to save us, but not in the way that anyone in the crowd envisaged. He would save the world not in

apparent kingly triumph but through a humble self-sacrifice on the cross.

The reaction of the crowd greeting Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem as compared with the crowd who would call for his crucifixion a few days later is significant and was yet another juxtaposition. The crowd following Jesus from Jericho and acclaiming him as he entered Jerusalem would have been mainly composed of Galileans who had followed him to Jerusalem. The crowd which would call for his crucifixion in a few days time, would have been mainly composed of Judeans.

Matthew doesn't really say what Jesus did when he entered Jerusalem, but the parallel account in Mark's gospel gives us a little more information:

“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.” (Mark 11:11 NIV)

It would seem that once Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd quickly dispersed. Of course, it would have been 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 following the Jewish rebellion against the Romans which resulted in the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

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. This parallel reading from Mark's gospel gives us a quiet ending to the Triumphal Entry, 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 of his pre-resurrection ministry.

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 to 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, acknowledging Him as our Lord and Master, and with true saving faith in his death and resurrection; which together have given us the forgiveness of our sins.

Let’s pray: Father we know that all we need to do to benefit from the salvation you provided for us through the sacrifice of Your Son, Jesus, on the cross, followed by his glorious resurrection, is simply to turn to Christ and turn away from our sins; both acknowledging Jesus as our Lord and Master and accepting that his death on the cross was a sacrifice for our sins. Father your word tells us that on the Last Day everyone will be forced to kneel and acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Master. So if we’ve never done that, or would like to do it again, let’s turn away from sin and acknowledge Christ as our Lord and Master and accept his sacrifice for our sins right here, right now, whilst we may still benefit from making that confession voluntarily before we’re forced to do it. So Father, I unreservedly turn to Christ and accept him as my Lord and master and gratefully acknowledge and accept his sacrificial death for the forgiveness of my sins; so providing my salvation. In Jesus’s name