

## JESUS AND HIS CITY

### Matthew 21: 1-17

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. On Palm Sunday we celebrate Jesus's entry into Jerusalem in triumph. Jesus carefully arranged the manner of his entry into Jerusalem, look at verses 1 to 3:

“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)

The road into Jerusalem from the East came over the shoulder of the Mount of Olives – the hill which looks across the Kidron valley to Jerusalem. Bethphage was on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, probably a mile from the city walls, and represented the outer limit of what was called greater Jerusalem for the purpose 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 inside 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. This was clearly a pre-arranged provision, probably with a local supporter of Jesus, as the words that the disciples are told to say – “the Lord needs them” – seem to represent a password rather than an explanation which would have persuaded unprepared villagers to hand over valuable animals to strangers. Strangely, the “Lord” referred to in the password is God the Father, Yahweh, rather than Jesus as Matthew always uses that title in that way.

We now find out why Jesus wants these animals, look at verses 4 to 7: “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 we have heard of Jesus riding on any kind of an animal. 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 because of physical necessity and it’s even more remarkable as pilgrims entering Jerusalem for this Feast were expected to do so on foot as a matter of Jewish tradition.

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 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. This is also consistent with his public actions in clearing and cleansing the Temple which we’ll come to a little later.

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 Matthew 20:25–28 Jesus has spoken of 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. Like Solomon he will not be a warrior king – such a king would have entered Jerusalem on a horse, an animal symbolic of war.

In verses 6 and 7 the disciples spread their cloaks on the animals, maintaining the image of royalty. Matthew doesn't say which animal Jesus rode, but both the Zechariah prophecy and the words of the other gospels – which only mention one animal, the colt – make it clear that it was the colt. Perhaps the donkey was brought along to help keep the colt, which don't forget had never been ridden, calm in the face of this new experience and the noisy crowds. Riding the colt not only fulfilled the words of Zechariah, but the fact that it had never been ridden made it particularly suitable for this sacred task. There's an interesting parallel here with 1 Samuel 6:7 and the use of two cows which had never been yoked to pull the Ark of the Covenant when it was returned to the Israelites.

Let's move on to look at verses 8 to 11:

“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!" 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 21:8-11 NIV)

The crowd's response to Jesus's Messianic gestures is overwhelmingly enthusiastic – they spread their cloaks on the road and spread palm branches – hence our modern name Palm Sunday – furthering the royal imagery and greet him with shouts from Psalms 113 - 118 – which were Psalms used to greet pilgrims during festivals, especially the Passover. By Jesus's time the shout “Hosanna” – which is actually two words in Hebrew “Hosha' na” – had become a greeting, rather like our modern “Praise the Lord”. Literally though it was a prayer for help - “Please save us” – wasn't that highly prophetic and relevant in terms of what Jesus was about to do for us on the cross.

At this point Jesus had not yet entered the city of Jerusalem, and Chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel makes it clear that the crowd accompanying Jesus had been following him and were not therefore people from Jerusalem. Verses 10 and 11 of our reading also make that clear. As Jesus entered the city people didn't even know who he was. That's highly significant in terms of what happened just before Jesus's crucifixion. The crowd accompanying Jesus before his entry into Jerusalem were probably Galileans who knew Jesus and were familiar with his ministry. The Judean Jews in Jerusalem did not know him so well. That explains the apparent change of heart from the royal acclamation just before Jesus's entry into the city to the crowds "crucify him" a few days later. These were two different groups of people with very different attitudes. Interestingly, when this Galilean crowd tell the Judean Jews about Jesus they refer to him as a prophet in verse 11 rather than as a king or the Messiah. Suggesting they were trying not to be provocative.

Let's now move on to look at the second theme of today's reading, the cleansing of the Temple, see verses 12 and 13:

"Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers'." (Matthew 21:12-13 NIV).

To really understand this we need to start with a little background. The Herodian Temple of Jesus's day was truly magnificent, it stood on a site bigger than a dozen football fields – the largest site of its kind in the ancient world and it was covered with gold or bright white stone. It was truly magnificent. It was an area of national pride. Access to the Temple area was through numerous gates in its walls. Each gate led into the court of the gentiles, which made up most of the area of the Temple. In the middle of the site was the Temple proper surrounded by a stone balustrade with inscriptions warning non-Jews that they were prohibited on pain of death from entering.

So Jesus entered the court of the gentiles, probably through the golden gate which faced the Mount of Olives and he saw the selling of sacrificial animals and the changing of money. Each year, around the time of the Passover, every adult Jewish male had to pay a Temple Tax of a half shekel (Exodus 30:13-15). But, many of the coins used in those times had idolatrous images on them and the only coin deemed acceptable for paying the Temple Tax was the Tyrian silver half shekel. To facilitate payment of this tax, tables were set up in the court of the gentiles around the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Adar (the month preceding the Passover). Sacrificial animals were generally on sale in the court of the gentiles.

In one sense the changing of money and selling of animals could be seen as a service to pilgrims. In most areas there would have been no access to the required Tyrian coins and sacrificial animals needed to be absolutely pure and unblemished, so bringing them from afar would have been a perilous business. But, these activities were not being conducted as a service to pilgrims but with the object of extracting large profits for the priests and their cronies who were given Temple concessions. The establishment were exploiting pilgrims in God's own Temple. It may well be that the permission to locate these activities there was a recent event. There is some evidence that these stalls were previously located on the Mount of Olives. The money changers typically charged a whole days wages to change your money and another days wages if you needed change, whilst a sacrificial lamb could cost half a years wages. Also the noise and clamour and smell of the animals greatly detracted from the God ordained purpose of the Temple.

In righteous indignation, Jesus cleansed the Temple of these rather sordid commercial activities. He overturned the tables of the money changers and chased away those selling sacrificial animals. The picture of Jesus we see here is far from the weak rather effeminate figure Christians often imagine, although Jesus was not leading a popular protest movement here. He is God's righteous servant, armed with right and empowered with zeal. No one could stand against him. Jesus's cleansing of the Temple was certainly an expression of his

desire to purify it and bring an end to dishonest commercialism. At the same time, Jesus was also proclaiming divine judgement on the Temple – not merely prophesying it, but proclaiming it and declaring that he would bring it about. Perhaps the cleansing of the Temple was a planned act to demonstrate Jesus’s authority as the Messiah, but it might well have been a spontaneous outburst of anger against unrighteousness.

Immediately following the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus begins to heal the sick – those who were forever sentenced to worship in the outer courts of the Temple. Look at verses 14 to 16:

“The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise?’”” (Matthew 21:14-16 NIV)

This is actually the only reference in the synoptic gospels to Jesus healing in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it seems to be the acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David rather than his healings which provokes the outrage of the chief priests and scribes. Jesus’s response in words taken from Psalm 8 is not conciliatory; the Messianic “secret” is now out in the open. The disciples are not mentioned in these verses, so this seems to have been Jesus’s personal challenge to the authorities.

So this morning we’ve seen that, as he entered the last week of his ministry prior to his crucifixion, Jesus openly made his claim to be our Messiah. He rode into Jerusalem on a colt of a donkey as our conquering king. He then pronounced judgement on the Temple as he cleansed it. Jesus is our Messiah and we must be like the Galileans who proclaimed him and welcomed him as the Messiah and not like the Judeans who on his triumphal entry asked “who is this” and a few days later shouted “crucify him”. Jesus is our Messiah and as we enter this Holy Week, the most important week in the Christian calendar, we need to echo the shouts of the crowds as Jesus approached Jerusalem – “Hosanna Jesus Save Us” – and if we turn to

him in faith truly believing in his death and resurrection and that he is our Lord, then he will indeed save us into eternal life. May our hearts be full of thanksgiving and gratitude for all that God has done for us.