

THE ROYAL KING (PALM SUNDAY)

Matt 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19

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Today is “Palm Sunday.” It is the start of what is called “Holy Week”¹ and it commemorates the entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. It is also called “Passion Sunday” since it is the beginning of the last week of events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.² Let’s begin by reading the first eleven verses from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

¹When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve (NRSV).

Now, let’s read from the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning at verse twelve.

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

¹“Great Week” as called by Greek Orthodox.

²Actually, we can only trace to the fourth century A.D. the church tradition that all these things (triumphal entry; cleansing of the Temple; Olivet discourse; anointing at Bethany; Last Supper; betrayal, trial, and crucifixion) transpired during what came to be called the Passion Week.

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” (NRSV).

This story presents a powerful yet painful mixture of truth and irony. Jesus is welcomed for what He in truth is: the Son of David, the Messiah of Israel. Yet, it is precisely as such that He will be rejected. The people cry out the truth as to who Jesus is and then crucify Him for being who He is. Seen through the eyes of the people, they crucify Jesus for not being who they confess Him to be. And when the Pharisees complain that they can do nothing, they are more right than they could have possibly known. Because of the something that they will do, Jesus will become what they fear most: the God-anointed Messiah of Israel. The Pharisees’ efforts to squash Jesus will in fact lead to Jesus becoming the King of Kings.

The “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem, as it is called, is one of the rare events in the life of Jesus that is told in all four Gospels. We have read the accounts of Mark and John. Mark’s viewpoint is through the eyes of one who accompanies Jesus; John’s viewpoint is through the eyes one of who is at Jerusalem and hears of Jesus’ coming.

The triumphal entry has all the markings of a pre-arranged plan. After all, the owner of the donkey may have been among the pilgrims traveling with Jesus. Jesus had walked all the way from Galilee; surely He did not *need* to ride a donkey for only the last two miles. So then, among the crowd of pilgrims, and with their vocal support, Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem is a deliberately staged “demonstration.” Taken together with the cleansing of the Temple, we have a sequence of symbolic actions designed to confront and to challenge the already paranoid Jerusalem authorities. In accordance with the prophets

Isaiah and Zechariah,³ Jesus comes *not* as a conquering warrior riding on a horse, but He comes as the prince of peace riding on a donkey. In the midst of an excited and enthusiastic crowd, an unbroken animal remains calm under the hands of the Messiah. To successfully ride a donkey that had never before been ridden is almost a miracle in and of itself! But then, we are talking about someone who walked on water. For Jesus, it seems, the choice of a donkey may not have been so much to *declare* His messiahship as it was to *deny* wrong notions of His messiahship. Although He accepts being praised as king, His actions proclaim to the crowds, “I am not the kind of king you expect. But I am the kind of king with which you ought to be familiar from the Scriptures.” The exuberant crowd of pilgrims was probably, for the most part, unaware of what was really happening. The Apostle John admits as much in his gospel: “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him” (John 12:16). By the way, the term “Hosanna” translates the Hebrew expression “save us”; however, by New Testament times it was simply a shout of joyous praise.⁴

The *triumphal entry* into Jerusalem is actually the *triumphal approach* to Jerusalem: all of the fanfare occurs *prior* to Jesus entering the city. When Jesus enters the city, the crowd of pilgrims quickly disperses and Jesus appears to have come to the Temple accompanied only by the Twelve. Jesus is Lord of the Temple, who must inspect its premises to determine whether the purpose intended by God is being fulfilled. In all of this, He speaks not a word. Notice Mark’s awkward conclusion: “When Jesus had looked around at everything, as it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve” (Mark 11:11). The triumphal entry did not conclude as Jesus had hoped. When Jesus finally enters the temple precincts, He is ignored. This quiet, anticlimactic ending foreshadows the storm of controversy that will break out the following day when Jesus returns to the Temple.

From the ninth chapter of Zechariah, beginning with the ninth verse, we read:

⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

³Matt 21:5 combines Isa 62:11 and Zech 9:9.

⁴The term “Hosanna” has the same root in Hebrew as the word “Jesus.” See Ps 118:25.

Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
¹⁰He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit (NRSV).

Three points stand out: (1) The coming of the gentle king is associated with the cessation of war. (2) The coming of the gentle king is associated with the proclamation of peace to the nations, extending his reign to the ends of the earth. (3) The coming of the gentle king is associated with the blood of God's covenant that spells release for prisoners. *No more war, peace, and freedom to serve the king—what a glorious vision!*

I wonder . . . we profess that the King has come. Do we practice what we preach? I wonder . . . when I look at our warring world, do we understand the King any better today than those first-century pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem? Do we shout the right words and then quickly desert Jesus when He fails to conform to our expectations? I wonder . . . what would we think of donkey-riding King in today's world? I wonder . . . how would we feel if Jesus entered our churches—our temples—and forcibly cast out everything that stands in the way of God fulfilling His will through us?

Jesus turns out to be a very testy visitor. Like the house-guest who seems pleasant enough at a distance but whose long-anticipated stay finds nothing that pleases them, nothing that even remotely satisfies them, Jesus quickly wears out His welcome. All too often, as Christian readers, we read the Gospels with a judgmental eye toward the crowds and especially toward the authorities. We might consider whether they are due some measure of sympathy. They roll out the red carpet, only to discover that Jesus has come to town to attack all that they prize.

The irony, of course, stems from the fact that *the Jesus whom the crowds welcome and want is not the Jesus they in fact get*. They desire the gentle guest, the teacher who will say what they want to hear and in ways that are pretty and soothing. The “kingdom” they proclaim as coming is not a kingdom for which they are prepared.

The King has come! Maybe it's time to climb down off our "high horse" and take a ride on a donkey. *The King has come!* What difference does it make in your life?