

Triumphal Entry Into Jerusalem

Matthew 21:1-11

April 3, 2022

Today we find ourselves in *Matthew*. Chapter 21 is Matthew's account of Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. This is a very familiar story, acted out each year in our service the week before Easter. Parallels are *Mark* 11:1-11, *Luke* 19:28-44, and *John* 12:12-19. There are interesting differences between these accounts. Matthew was writing a gospel account particularly directed toward Jewish readers. Here and in many other places he uses quotations from Jewish scriptures, often from the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures, the *Septuagint*. Here's the scripture reading:

Matthew 21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately.^[a]" ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd^[b] spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

- a. [Matthew 21:3](#) Or ‘*The Lord needs them and will send them back immediately.*’
- b. [Matthew 21:8](#) Or *Most of the crowd*

As mentioned by the Lesson Writer, the quote in verse 5 is from the prophet Zechariah, Chapter 9:9. (John’s gospel also gives a scriptural reference for Jesus riding on a colt.) The second quote, here and in the other gospels, is from Psalm 118 26a, “**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,**” for what the crowd shouts.

There is sometimes some confusion about the kind of animal Jesus rode. The domesticated Nubian wild ass was used as a beast of burden and for riding in Egypt and Palestine. At the time, horses were still relatively small. They could and were used for chariots, where they did not have to bear the weight of a rider. Eventually, by Greek and Roman times, horses of greater size and strength were sufficient for mounted warriors. But in the time of David and Solomon, the king and his sons rode asses. Indeed, Solomon was mounted on David’s own ass for succession to David, as mentioned by the lesson writer (*I Kings* 1:33). The ass was the generally used riding animal at that time. Interestingly, here the NRSV translates “ass” as “mule” instead of “donkey,” as it does in *Matthew*. Older translations, King James and RSV, use “ass.” The switch to “donkey,” a smaller animal, can be confusing. By Roman times, military officers were mounted on horses. The ass was not used for military purposes as far as I can tell, except likely as a pack or draft animal.

The Zechariah quote is:

**9 ⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
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.
¹⁰ He^[a] 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.**

As mentioned, NRSV substitutes “donkey” for “ass.” Zechariah was a post-exile prophet. By about that time, horses were being used for mounted cavalry. Both the Persians and Greeks used cavalry during Alexander the great’s campaigns around 330 B.C. So, for a king to use an ass instead of a war horse was a symbol of humility. But, notice that this king to come, this humble king, will Command peace. There is no lack of power, for all of his humility. Jesus, of course, would have been well aware of this passage as he chose his manner of entry into Jerusalem. He came in peace, not as a military savior.

A second point of confusion in Matthew’s account is mention of both the ass and her colt being used by Jesus. It is awkward to imagine Jesus riding two animals at one time. The poetry in *Zechariah* has:

**humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**

This is an example of poetic repetition in Hebrew, where two successive lines are parallel, repeating the idea with different words. Matthew, however, seems to take this literally, as requiring Jesus ride both. He is working from source material from Mark, who like Luke and John, has only the colt. In *John* 12:15 we read “**Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, behold, thy king is coming, sitting on an ass’s colt** (RSV).” This may be a paraphrase of the *Zechariah* verse.

Spreading palms and garments before the king is perhaps a somewhat improvised way of celebrating. We still hear and see examples of “rolling out the red carpet” for celebrities and dignitaries, even in our time. On this occasion, Jesus’s entry in this manner was entirely unexpected. Those attending did what they could with cloaks and garments, palm fronds, and even “leafy branches they had cut in the field” (*Mark* 11:8). (I am reminded of the legend of Sir Walter Raleigh using his cloak for Queen Elizabeth to avoid her stepping into a puddle.) In this instance, we can see that “**the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”**” (verse 10). Jesus’s entry was not anticipated by those in authority! I had not remembered the example the lesson writer gives of Jehu. When Jehu confesses to his colleagues that he has just been anointed king of Israel, they spread garments before him as an improvised celebration (*II Kings* 9:11-13).

In *Matthew* and *Luke*, Jesus came into the temple, and seeing the buyers and the sellers, took action and “cleansed” the temple. In *Luke*, as he approaches, Jesus mourns for Jerusalem, saying “**If you, even you, had had even recognized on this day the things that make for peace!**” (19:42, and more following). He is asked by the Pharisees to quiet his disciples prior to entering the temple. In *Mark*, he enters the temple, then looks around, and then since it was late, he returns to Bethany. In *John*, the crowd greet him and were so numerous that **The Pharisees said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”** (John 12:19) In John’s gospel, the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple comes earlier. *John* mentions that many in the crowd were testifying about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

The lesson writer asks if the same people who were hailing Jesus as he entered were the same ones who would call for him to be crucified several days later. I rather doubt it. I think the best perspective on this is given by Cleopas and his friend, who narrate their own view of things as they trudge home to Emmaus.

Luke 24:¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹ He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^[a] who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.^[b] Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

a. [Luke 24:19](#) Other ancient authorities read *Jesus the Nazorean*

b. [Luke 24:21](#) Or *to set Israel free*

Cleopus and his friend very likely were with the crowd at Jesus’s entry. The turn of events at Passover though has confused them. “**²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.**” The events at the tomb are mysterious too. These are not the words of those who would have shouted “Crucify

him!” They are, or were, followers, hoping for God’s reign, but not yet seeing it. They do see Jesus. They know what to do! They hasten to spread the Good News.

As we prepare to go through Holy Week and the events between Palm Sunday and Easter, we have the advantage of knowing that Easter is coming. The events we remember and celebrate have happened, now almost 2000 years ago. That first Easter still resonates all the way across history into the present and future. We live with the assurances conveyed by Jesus to his disciples and transmitted to us through the gospels. We also have the words of Paul and others of the early Church who lived out that gospel, and the examples of the saints over the centuries since.

But even so, for modern era people as well as those in Jesus’s day, it’s possible to be confused. There are so many voices in our day advocating other religions and practices, those centered on self, and those who would make an idol of ideologies of various sorts. Sometimes it seems that people of our time lack humility about the knowledge and accomplishments of humankind. We think we know everything, or that Science is a god that gives us all of the answers. Well, that’s not new. In Jesus’s day the religious authorities thought that they had all of the answers too. The Roman emperors, at least the more self-deluded ones, mistook themselves for gods. It’s still happening.

The true savior of the world came into Jerusalem, riding on an ass. He submitted to the worst the world of that time could do to him. He rose from the dead in triumph on the third day, despite all of that. The symbol of his humiliation, the cross, has become our symbol of how to live. We are to follow Jesus, in humility, putting His way before our own.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, or Redeemer and Friend, we wish we could have been there to wave branches and sing to you as you walked so faithfully toward your death in Jerusalem for us. Help us praise you today and every day in a way that reflects your character. Amen.