

A Humble Parade

^{NRS} **Matthew 21:1** 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. " 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 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 Humble Parade

Almost everyone loves a parade. People certainly turn out to watch if there's a parade going by. These days, we might watch a parade in hopes of seeing colorful floats, or hearing a band, or to see fantastic costumes. And, maybe we hope to see somebody important. Today's text is about a procession, a parade. There aren't any flower covered floats or marching bands or clowns. But, people were hoping to see somebody important.

It's a pretty simple story, it seems. Jesus doesn't preach a deep sermon or tell a parable that takes an unexpected twist. Jesus sends a couple of disciples to go get a donkey and her foal. "If someone should happen to notice that you're taking the animals, just tell them that the Lord needs them."

We're told that the disciples bring the donkey and foal and we kind of gloss over the rest of the verse. It says that they put their cloaks on them and he sat on them. If we stop here too long we'll start to wonder about how one rides two donkeys at once, especially if they're of different sizes. Or, would it be kind for a grown man to ride a foal that is still with her mother? If we get stuck here trying to rationalize the text, we're going to miss the parade - and the point of the story.

All four gospels tell this story, each in their own way. John says that people laid palm branches in the road and that detail, which is not mentioned by the other gospel writers, gives this day its name - Palm Sunday. Matthew and John mention the quote from Zechariah 9:9. "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey." Those in the crowd who knew and remembered that passage might see this man from Nazareth riding a donkey and recall the words about a king, humble and riding on a donkey. But it probably didn't occur to most of the crowd, and in John we read that it wasn't until after the resurrection that his disciples made the connection with the passage in Zechariah.

Nevertheless, the crowd paves the way with their cloaks and branches, just as crowds had done in the past for the jubilant royal processions of Solomon (1 Kings 1:32-37), King Jehu (2 Kings 9:13) Simon Maccabeus (1 Macc 13:51) and Judas Maccabeus (2 Macc 10:7)

So, the crowd is shouting "Hurrah!" and paving the way for Jesus on a donkey. When the crowd gets to the city, we're told that all the city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

Oddly enough, the answer isn't "This is the Messiah" or "This is our new king." The answer is "This is the prophet, the preacher, Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee."

It seems like this text often leads to sermons about how fickle the crowd was, cheering as Jesus enters the city the first of the week and calling for his death only a few days later. Jerusalem is a city of contradictions. It's the Holy City, the city of the great King (Matt 5:35) - and the city that kills the prophets (Matt 23:37). "How easy it is for us to think that by celebrating Palm Sunday we acknowledge Jesus as king in a way that Jerusalem failed to do! We need constantly to be humbled by those harsh words that remind us of our Hosannas: 'Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (7:21, NRSV)."¹ I would agree that we can all too easily move between easy praise - and failure to be loyal. The disciples, all of them, not just Peter, illustrate that so starkly on the night Jesus was arrested. But there's no reason to believe that the crowd who shouted "Hosanna" as Jesus entered Jerusalem was the same crowd who called for the release of Barabbas. In fact, all through the week, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders were afraid of the crowd, a crowd that was spellbound by Jesus' teaching. They're so afraid of this crowd that is drawn to Jesus, that they seek out a way to arrest Jesus in the dark of night.

No, this story of Christ's entry into Jerusalem isn't about a fickle crowd. Instead, it's about a stark contrast. The Romans have a problem, you see. The city is filling up with pilgrims who have come for Passover. Passover is a celebration of escape from slavery in Egypt, a celebration of escape from tyranny. The atmosphere is a tinderbox, ready to ignite. The Romans know that crowds are unpredictable. Crowds can become mobs, and things can get ugly. The Romans know how you impress the populace. You rule with an iron fist. You keep the people afraid of your potential for violence. You impress the people with your might. When you enter a city, you ride a stallion, and troops in armor and bearing weapons march with you.

But this Jesus enters the city not on a stallion, not on a mare, not on a male donkey, but a female donkey, a nursing donkey with her foal. There aren't any troops but he draws a huge crowd that shouts "Hurrah" and paves the way for him with palm branches and their cloaks. He looks to be lampooning a Roman triumphal entry. He appears to be thumbing his nose at Roman Imperial pomp and might. "The fact [is] the gentle king arrives in his capital with no sword in his hand, vulnerable to whatever his enemies choose to do to him. He who taught 'Do not resist one who is evil' (Matt. 5:39) is prepared to live and die by his own word."² The Romans live and die by the sword, but this Jesus and his followers bear no arms. Jesus is no military threat. That much is obvious to everyone. But he's still a threat, and Jesus' greatest threat is ideological. Even the mighty Romans are smart enough to be afraid of ideas as well as military might. The Romans aren't sure what to do about it just yet, but he's drawing a huge crowd and they think maybe they're losing the grip of fear that they use to control the populace. This Jesus certainly doesn't seem to be afraid of them. In fact, he seems to ignore them and that's something they can't tolerate.

The whole city was stirred or in turmoil. Actually the Greek is stronger than that. It says the whole city was shaken, as in an earthquake. The city is shaken by a stark contrast in ideologies. Within Jerusalem's walls, people are faced with Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. Now in contrast, we see the peace of Christ. On the one hand, Rome declares that might makes right, that power trumps everything else, and that the only path to peace is through violence and victory. On the other hand, Jesus declares that love of God is supreme and loving one's neighbor is close behind. Jesus shows that a real leader, cares for the flock, tends the sick, feeds the

hungry – in stark contrast with the way Rome only cares about becoming richer and more powerful.

Later in the week, we find the Roman governor and the King of Heaven looking at each other, face to face in the same room. Pilate asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

John 18:36 “Jesus replied, ‘Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here.’” (NJB) Many translations say, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Now, I always heard this as, “My kingdom is on another plane of existence. It’s in the life to come in heaven, after we die.” And that is true, so far as it goes. But I’ve come to hear the phrase “not of this world” much more broadly. We are told to be in the world (Philippians 2:15) but not of the world (John 15:19, 1 Cor. 2:12, 1 John 2:16). Jesus says, “My kingdom is not founded on all this!” (J.B. Phillips translation) It’s not founded on oppression, on military might, on peace maintained through fear and violence. “My kingdom doesn’t consist of what you see around you. . . . I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king.” (*The Message*, translation by Eugene H. Peterson) My kingdom doesn’t consist of rich leaders and an overburdened populace. It’s made up of servant leaders and food shared on a hillside. I’m not the world’s kind of king; I rule with love, not tyranny, with humility, not pride.

Through the ages, we’ve often lost sight of Christ’s kingdom, a kingdom that is “not of this world.” Popes led armies into battle to protect church property. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a nursing donkey. Centuries later, Crusaders on war horses, clad in battle armor, with spear, lance, mace, and sword entered the same city. What irony! Repeatedly, through the centuries, those who have called themselves Christians have looked and acted more like Romans than disciples of the King of heaven. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem that day revealed the stark difference between the way the world works and the way of discipleship. By contrast, it put the spotlight on Roman imperial injustice and the collaboration of religious leaders. It wasn’t a spotlight that was welcome – then, or any time since then.

At one level, “Herod is king, Caesar is lord, Pilate is governor, the demons rule, and they will all team up to take Jesus’ life. At the other level, Jesus is Lord and King and Messiah, the forces of heaven rule, and no one will take his life; he will give it freely. The first level is visible to all; the second is seen only through the eyes of faith.”³ May we strive to always see through the eyes of faith. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
Welcome Christ into your heart.
Welcome the Kingdom of Heaven into your life.
And be prepared for that to change everything!

¹ Hare, p 240

² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) p 238

³ Thonas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 233-234