

Sermon for Palm Sunday — April 5, 2020

Matthew 21:1-11

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Ever since I was a child, I loved the liturgies of Holy Week. While I never fully understood all the symbolism and theological nuances of the week, the pageantry and drama made the story of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection tangible and real for me.

While most of my friends and family looked forward to Easter, I anticipated Palm Sunday. Still to this day I long to hear that wondrous hymn "All Glory, Laud, and Honour" and to process with countless others along the street to the doors of the church, all-the-while waving palms high in the air. The moment I would hear that hymn, I knew in my very being that things were about to get real.

Yet for all its wonder and glory, the Liturgy of Palm Sunday unsettles me. Not simply because I know what comes next in the story. Rather, I've often wondered whether our re-enactment of the day reflects what really happened the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Have we over-dramatized the story so much that we've lost the meaning of the day?

To further complicate matters this year, I write my Palm Sunday sermon from my home office knowing full well there will be no triumphant liturgy this Sunday. I know too that on Sunday morning I will be alone in our parish church, celebrating a much more simplified liturgy for Palm Sunday, only for you to participate by live-stream video. A part of me aches as I write this. I've yet to celebrate a Palm Sunday liturgy with you, the parish community, since I first came here two years ago this week. My soul longs to hear again the glorious sounds of "All Glory, Laud, and Honour."

Perhaps, however, this period of social distancing, self-isolation, and dislocation may help us to better experience and understand Palm Sunday and Holy Week in a deeper, more meaningful way. Might this time give us an opportunity to be one with the solitary Christ?

To better understand this, I think it might be helpful for us to consider the first gospel lesson for Sunday, a reading from the Gospel of Matthew. While all four gospels tell of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, each has its own particular take on the story. Very much to form, Matthew roots Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the prophetic tradition. Jesus, according to Matthew, is the Davidic king who was foretold by the prophets. He is the promised Messiah whom the city of Jerusalem awaits.

Although we may not be familiar with the passage of scriptures to which Matthew refers, we are given a clue, or a hint, that Matthew is speaking of one of the prophets. Matthew uses in this passage a phrase he so often repeats throughout his gospel: "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet." (Matthew 21:4) The prophet whom Matthew refers is Zechariah, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament. The passage Matthew quotes is from Zechariah 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.

Accordingly, Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem aligns with Zechariah's prophecy. Unlike the other three gospel writers, Matthew has Jesus riding into Jerusalem on two animals, a donkey and a colt. As improbable as that is, the choice of animal — or animals — is critical to interpreting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Jesus is not like other kings or royal officials who ride into cities on great horses; rather, he rides on a humble donkey.

This latter point is important to keep in mind as we read this story. From what we gather later in Matthew's gospel, and from the other gospels, it is likely the Roman governor Pontius Pilate arrived into Jerusalem about the same time as Jesus, about the time of Passover. Some writers have even suggested that Pilate would've

entered from the western side of Jerusalem, while Jesus from the east. What is important here is the striking difference between Pilate's and Jesus' arrival to the city.

Pilate's arrival to the city would've been quite grand. Historical records indicate Roman governors were afforded stately, if not royal processions. This was likely the case with Pilate. The might of the Roman Empire would've been displayed in all its glory as Pilate rode into the city of Jerusalem. Moreover, the religious leaders of Jerusalem and ordinary citizens would've turned out in throngs to welcome the governor. They did so not because he was well liked — in fact, we have evidence to the contrary — but to win favours of the governor. As biblical scholar Brent Kinman notes,

The coming of a Roman governor to a city presented its rulers, merchants and inhabitants with an opportunity to enhance their position in the governor's eyes or, conversely, the risk that would inevitably follow from curt or insulting behaviour. A proper welcome could prove to be a financial and judicial advantage to individual citizens as well as city officials; an improper one could have unpredictable and unfavourable results.¹

Finally, we can be certain Pilate's reception was highly guarded and protected by Roman infantry and horseman. There were numerous groups and individuals intent on overthrowing the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, and Passover would've been a particularly tense time in the city. While many suspect the city had a population of 25,000 people, some estimate nearly 30,000 visitors would descend upon the city during the festival of Passover. As we know so well in our own day, such occasions can prove to be dangerous for political leaders, particularly so when revolutionary sentiments prevail among the inhabitants.

Now let us contrast Jesus' entry with that of Pilate's. Despite our popular imagination that all of Jerusalem turned out to see Jesus arrive, the gospels hint that

¹ Brent Kinman, Jesus' Triumphal Entry in the Light of Pilate's, *New Testament Studies*, vol. 40, 1994, p. 443

may not have been the case. First of all, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem lacks the royal grandeur of Pilate's procession. Jesus simply rides into the city on a donkey, a humble animal unlike that of the mighty horse.

This is not to deny Jesus' entry into Jerusalem wasn't royal in some way. Certainly the entry has royal overtones, with crowds tossing branches and cloaks on the road before him and lauding him as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Palm branches carried nationalistic symbolism, reminding people of an earlier revolution in Jerusalem, namely the Maccabean uprising. Furthermore, both acts are celebratory gestures of welcome. Additionally two potential scripture stories allude to this sort of royal welcome: the previously referenced passage from Zechariah and the entry of King Solomon in the first Book of Kings, chapter one. In that story, Solomon, the successor to King David, rides into Jerusalem on a mule amidst a large crowds' praise.

Yet these facts give scholars cause to question the real size of the crowd. Had Jesus really drawn a large crowd, with all acclaiming Jesus as king, the Romans would've noticed and been alarmed. Remember, Pilate was likely in the city and the danger for political discord and revolution was intense at the time. Historical records indicate the Romans spared no time or resources in confronting such an egregious act of sedition. Had Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to as great of crowd as we imagine, he would've likely been captured by the Romans. His imprisonment and death would've likely been expedited. Yet the scriptures are clear that never happened. It would be sometime before Jesus would come into the concern of the Roman officials and the religious authorities. Even Matthew makes that clear; he inserts several parables and stories between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his story of Jesus' passion and death.

All this is not to suggest that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem never happened. Although that question has been raised by several scholars, the general consensus is that it likely did, but not in the way we so often imagine. Perhaps our subdued celebration of Palm Sunday this year might be more faithful to the story of Jesus'

entry into Jerusalem than what we realize. Maybe we've made Jesus into a king of our wishing, and not the king Jesus proclaimed himself to be.

Consider, for a moment, a detail of the story I noted earlier: Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a horse. As one writer notes, Jesus' choice of a donkey further shows "that Jesus is not a messiah who will rule by violent means."² Moreover, the "horse was an animal of war; the donkey was not."³ Matthew consistently asserts Jesus is a king unlike any other. He comes not by the sword (Matthew 26:52) but rather by way of the peacemaker (Matthew 5:9).

Hopefully this gives you pause to consider how we acclaim Jesus today. Far too long in Christian history the kingship of Jesus has been portrayed quite differently than that of the biblical narrative. Ever since Christianity became the official religion of an empire and aligned with nationalism, we've fashioned Jesus to be the warrior king who fights for our interests. Just consider our neighbours to the south and the images of Evangelical preachers surrounding the president with arms outstretched in prayer, asking Jesus to bless him in his political endeavours.

Jesus has been aligned with national interest. We need not look to our neighbours to the south to see this; we simply need to consider how the gospel has been used to oppress indigenous persons in our own land. The painful truth is that we've sometimes forgotten the humble king who came not by the sword but rather by the cross with a the crown of thorns on his head.

Our celebration of Palm Sunday this year is an opportunity for us to meditate and contemplate on the real nature of Jesus. As much as I will miss the thunderous sound of "All Glory, Laud, and Honour," the crowds processing into church, and the drama and pageantry of Palm Sunday Liturgy, I will pray and reflect on how Jesus must've felt as he rode into Jerusalem knowing in a few days time he would be alone on a cross, deserted by all those who loved him. Yet as I do, I will also

² Tucker S. Ferda, "Between Text and Sermon Matthew 21:1–11," from *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 2019, Vol. 73(3) 295.

³ Ferda, 296.

remember that it was by his humility and embrace of the cross that Jesus was raised to glory, as our Epistle for the Liturgy of the Passion reminds us this day:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5-11)