

Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSVue)

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.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

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.”

Hosanna

We don’t like to talk politics in church. I’ve been told throughout my life, “Friends who want to stay friends shouldn’t discuss politics or religion.” You’ve probably heard something similar. The logical conclusion would be that we shouldn’t mix the two, either. America was founded on the very idea of the separation of church and state. And in part, this admonition to keep the two separate—and to not talk about them with others—is to avoid the discord that might arise from the clash of two opposing ideological stances. This is further supported when you hear a popular addendum to that phrase: “Don’t discuss religion or politics with anyone... unless you know they agree with you.”

It would seem, however, that our evangelist, Matthew, didn’t get the memo. Because throughout his gospel, and especially in this scene, Matthew seeks to keep the politics of his day and his religion of following Christ in constant dialogue. And this intention of Matthews, for his narrative and his theology to be so reflective of this marriage of the two ideas, reflects the reality of those living in colonies of the Roman Empire, including Judea and Galilee. The empire’s

cultural, economic, and political siege on its colonies—masked by religious freedom and governmental autonomy—facilitated the extraction of raw materials and agricultural products for the benefit of the metropolis, thereby intentionally keeping the colonized peoples in poverty. In other words, in the lands that the Roman empire colonized, including Judea and Galilee where Jesus and Matthew lived, the land and the people there were exploited into poverty. And this exploitation inversely led to the fattening of those in power, of the rich and royal and otherwise very important people who lived in Rome.

As such, we can't miss the political dimension of Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem, and of the crowd. Indeed, Matthew's context calls us to engage in a reading that considers the political dynamics of Jesus's age.

Our reading begins by grounding Jesus's entry into Jerusalem within the Jewish narrative that the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of, from which the Passion narrative begins. But the moment of his entry into Zion, or the Holy City, is presented as something far more significant than just the movement of a group of people, even simply a prophet and his disciples.

In the command from Jesus to his disciples, to find a donkey and a colt, untie them, and bring them to him, Matthew alludes to Zechariah 9:9, a scripture with which he would have been familiar. Zechariah reads: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! ... See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The prophet goes on to say that the king will cut off the instruments of war—chariots, bows, war horses—and will command peace to the nations, and his dominion will be from sea to sea, to the ends of the earth.

According to Zechariah, the king is triumphant and victorious, entering the city as a conquering hero following the defeat of Israel and Judah's longtime enemies.¹ That text emphasizes the fact that the king rides a donkey, not a war-horse, by using three different words for the animal: donkey, colt, and foal. This is a construction known as parallelism, a popular construction in Ancient Hebrew literature wherein sentences or phrases would mirror, contrast, or expand upon each other. In this case, it would mean something like, "He will arrive on a donkey, and not just any donkey, but a colt, the foal of a donkey." (As an aside, Matthew's account is the only one of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem that mentions both a colt and a donkey. Some scholars interpret this discrepancy as Matthew taking that prophecy a bit *too* literally, rather than as an intensifier. That's neither here nor there, in my opinion, but it does make for an interesting understanding of Matthew's account of the Passion.)

For us, though, it's easy to read this morning's scripture, especially after hearing the prophecy in Zechariah, and associate it with pure triumph. Or, conversely, to read it and then think of the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," who rides on a lowly donkey and receives the praise of children, as Charles Wesley liked to write.²

But this sanitized reading isn't true to either the gospels or to Zechariah. For instance, the word "humble," in Zechariah, which Matthew quotes, doesn't mean simply "humble," as we

¹ Zechariah 9:1-8

² Charles Wesley, "Gentle Jesus," 1767.

think of it today. The word carries today a connotation of “meek,” “benevolent,” or “worldly.” But in Hebrew, and to Matthew when he quotes it here in his gospel, it doesn’t mean that. To them, it would have the meaning of “poor,” afflicted, or even wretched.

And finally, the crowd responds to Jesus’s entry, and their response is clear and palpable. Verses 8 and 9 describe the reaction of the people on the periphery—just outside the walls of the city—where cut branches and cloaks from their backs carpet the ground over which the donkey bearing the Messiah passes. As he moves through the crowd, the people shout “Hosanna” to him.

And we do, too, this morning. On Palm Sunday, we shout Hosanna like it’s “Go birds!” We yell it like it’s “Hallelujah,” which means “Praise God.” The people of Jerusalem, the crowds that gather to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, or simply to see what all the fuss is about, shout it out loud. Have you ever thought about what it means? Because it isn’t simply a cheer. It isn’t just an exclamation that acknowledges some glorious deed. It means, literally, “Save, we pray.” “God, save us.” It’s a cry for help, for salvation from some clear and present threat—not someday in the future, but right now. This begs the question, though: why do the people react in this way? What do they need that Jesus could offer them?

I’ll say again, Matthew’s message is steeped in the real needs and experiences of the people of his time, in Jerusalem and in other nations that were colonized by Rome. Jesus enters the city in a state of apparent triumph, just like the Israelite kings of yore, or like Roman generals and leaders of his own age. These leaders would do so in the tradition of a victorious entry, in which a conquering general would march into a subjugated city to the sound of triumphant cheers.

Of course, these people would enter into the city on horseback, flanked by an entourage and preceded with parades and other festivities. But Jesus’s entry, again, is comparatively humble, in stark contrast to those of the warmonger kings that preceded Jesus. We would be wise to consider how Matthew portrays Jesus here. Where does Jesus take his stand? Is he with those people who make war? Or is he on the side of those who are oppressed? Does he offer relief to those who suffer? Or does he offer greater power to those who already have taken everything?

I think we know the answers to those questions. We know that our God is the God of those on the margins. Our God is a God who came to earth for us, for *everyone*, that all may have eternal life, not to condemn, but to save. Jesus comes, humble, riding a colt, as an offering, yes, *and* as a king. But he comes unlike any kind of king that the people have ever seen before. He comes offering salvation to those who have been abused by the ones in power, and to drive out those who would abuse the word of God and the people of God for their own profit.

Let us not forget that Jesus’s first action in his ministry in the synoptic gospels (that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is to violently cleanse the temple.³ Jesus is not simply a meek and lowly person, come to be nice and sweet. He is not here to be humble, to keep his head down and avoid trouble. If that’s how we understand humility, then it’s hardly appropriate for what Jesus did or who he was. Likewise, it’s an inappropriate term for who we are called to be.

³ Matthew 2:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46

Of course, we are called to be humble. As followers of Christ, we are not to be proud, or puffed-up blowhards. But if we are to follow Christ, and to do our best in doing so, we must look at his entry into Jerusalem and see where we align in this portion of the Passion. Perhaps this is the beginning of a triumph—over sin, over death—but this is also a call to action. This is a cry for help from the people on the margins, and it is being answered in Christ, by Christ, and by those who follow him.

We are called to serve Christ as our king. We are called to live as he did. It's a strange sermon that puts Jesus's entry into Jerusalem—the beginning of the Passion narrative, or the end of his life—as a call to follow Christ. But we are shown in this story, especially in the story of Matthew in which Jesus fulfills every requirement, in quite a literal way, laid forth in the prophecy in Zechariah, who Jesus is. We are shown where Christ is, and even though his journey is coming to a close, ours is only just beginning. Palm Sunday shows us that Jesus is king, and is a king in whom the people of God's ancient hope for God's reign over all the world is being fulfilled, beginning on this day in Jerusalem. And in the church, our Hosannas, while they are cries for help, they are also treated as shouts of praise. We may as well say "Hallelujah! Amen!" And we do, because we know who we are, and who we are becoming in Christ. But we also later this week will be going through the rest of the Passion story, with palms today and pain on Thursday. As cries for help turn into shouts of praise, even as our king enters Jerusalem in glory, the cross looms.

Matthew, too, sees the cross looming. As this part of the story ends, Jesus's "triumphal" entry closes in irony: the crowd outside of Jerusalem, who has just hailed Jesus as the long-awaited king, the "Son of David," say "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." They hail him not as king, but a prophet. Their words come nowhere close to a complete understanding of who Jesus is, and what a hope, what a victory, he will bring.

And so we find ourselves in tension this morning, both in our text and in our worship. The way to Calvary is paved in this tension: the glory of God, the reign of Christ, and the limits of what the people can ultimately see. The ultimate irony is that the people's response to him is entirely inadequate to his ability and glory. It's completely inadequate to even Matthew's own understanding of the prophecy, of Jesus's role in it. The people, though they wish for a savior, don't seem to get it. And so we might ask ourselves a final question: Do we believe this, that Jesus is the king of our lives? And if we do, how do we show this?

There is a great desire in Holy Week to rush ahead, to spend time in the glory, laud, and honor of Palm Sunday and Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. We want to give it the due time, to glorify God, to declare Christ's triumph as he enters Jerusalem, and then jump immediately into the Resurrection truth that we know is coming. But we must sit in this tension, ourselves. For the truth is that as we do ascribe the glory to God that God deserves, we must also face that we need help. Our hosannas must mean "Hosanna," "God, help us." We must call upon the Lord to save, ourselves, our communities, and our world.

Our calls for action to God must also spur one another into action, that our world might be a better world, a more just world, a more equal world, for all. The last shall be first and the

first shall be last, and Christ who came in on a colt will be lifted higher in his humility than any king will be in splendor; this we know. But before this can happen, we must know what will happen to him. We must know how we are called to follow, and how we do not.

But the good news is that, though we cannot rush on to the day of resurrection, we know that despite all that we may have done to one another, to ourselves, and to Christ, he still will rise. Jesus's resurrection is coming, and we can anticipate it with a tension of joy amidst sorrow. This is an unsettling, uncanny time, I will fully admit. Isn't it an honor? To sit so deeply with both hope and despair? To know what is coming, and to be sad for it, and to know how Christ is continuing to work in each of us? It is a joy that to me passes all understanding. Our prophet, our king, our God, reigns, even when we cannot see with our own eyes. And so we cry for help and ascribe praise to God. Hallelujah! Hosanna! Amen!