

The Triumphal Entry

Matthew 21:1-11

Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 49. Our text today is in Matthew 21, but we will first read few other Scriptures to help us understand what happened in Matthew 21. So Genesis 49.

The Triumphal Entry is our name for Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, on his last trip to Jerusalem. Mark's Gospel shows us that from the Triumphal Entry to resurrection Sunday was one week. On that Thursday was the Last Supper, Jesus was arrested later that evening, Friday he was crucified and buried, and he rose on the first day of the next week.

This entry to Jerusalem gives us a picture of Jesus himself, the Lord we know and love and trust and follow. Let's see if we can make our understanding of Jesus a little richer and fuller from what he did here. Jesus staged an event. He set up something for people to see. He set it up so he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. He said nothing to explain it, he just did it. Why? Why?

Back to Genesis 49. Old Jacob was dying in Egypt. He had all his 12 sons around him, eventually the 12 tribes, and he gave a blessing to each one. Here's a part of what he told Judah:

Jacob Predicts a Tethered Donkey.

Genesis 49:10-11a *The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch.*

A great ruler will come from Judah, *and the obedience of the nations shall be his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch.* So Jesus sends two disciples into a village, and says to them, "There's a donkey and her foal tied up there. Untie them and bring them here. And if anyone asks, tell them I need it." That's Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49.

Zechariah Predicts Riding the Donkey

Now to Zechariah 9. Zechariah writes perhaps 1200 years later. He's writing Jews who are back in Judea after their exile in Babylon. They've been back from Babylon about 20 years. And Zechariah the prophet also speaks about the great ruler that will come from the tribe of Judah.

Zechariah 9:9,10b - *Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10b ... His rule will extend from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

Zechariah tells Jerusalem to rejoice and shout because her king is coming. But Zechariah is also reading Jacob's words in Genesis 49. We may assume beyond any doubt that Zechariah knows what Jacob prophesied 1200 years earlier about the great ruler from Judah.

Jacob said, *"he will die his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch."* Zechariah takes that a little farther: *he comes lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Jacob also said, *the obedience of the nations will be his.* Jacob said all the nations will obey this ruler from Judah. Zechariah knows this and repeats it: *his rule will extend from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth.* Zechariah uses Jacob's prophecy, and adds to it.

All the Gospels have the triumphal entry, and they all quote from Zechariah's prophecy in Zechariah 9. That's as it should be. Remember that Zechariah was using Jacob's prophecy.

Now, please turn to Matthew 20. In Mt 20 Jesus says what will happen in Jerusalem, and it was not for the Jews to praise him as the great ruler from Judah. Mt 20:17.

Jesus Predicts his Death in Jerusalem. Mt 20:17-19

*Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*

Jesus will ride a donkey into Jerusalem. He will be righteous and lowly, like Zechariah said. But victorious? Triumphant? That's what Zechariah had in mind, and that's what Jacob had in mind too, nearly 4,000 years ago now. But that's not what will happen, and Jesus knows it. Now, finally, with these Scriptures in mind, let's read our text, beginning in Matthew 21:1

Mt 21:1 *As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."*

<sup>4</sup> *This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:*

<sup>5</sup> *"Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"*

<sup>6</sup> *The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. <sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

<sup>10</sup> *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"*

<sup>11</sup> *The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."*

## Why did Jesus Ride a Donkey into Jerusalem?

That's the real question: Jesus set this up, he decided to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Why, when in a few days the city leaders would condemn him, and hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified? What did Jesus want to accomplish?

A minor point before we pick that up: Matthew wrote this to show that Jesus fulfills not just Zechariah's prophecy, about riding into Jerusalem on a donkey Jacob's prophecy, about the ruler's donkey being tethered. Jesus told two disciples, "go into that village, and right away you'll see a donkey and her foal tied up. Untie them and bring them, I need them."

Matthew quotes Zechariah, but not Jacob. But that happens often in the NT, that the writer's refer to the OT without quoting it. They assume we've read the story and will get it. Jesus was thinking about Jacob's prophecy as well as Zechariah's, and Matthew wants us to get that.

But: why did Jesus do this? What did Jesus want to accomplish? We are not mind readers, so we do not know, but we can figure some of it out.

Jesus was obeying the call of God in the Scriptures, and quietly sending out his message. Do you remember how God called Ezekiel? God told Ezekiel, "you give them my message, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are a rebellious people" (Ezekiel 2:7; 3:11, 27).

Jesus knows he's heading into a intense week of teaching, and it will end in fatal rejection. Jesus knows that he is the coming king, and his task is to offer the Jews the kingdom of God. Jesus does not just happen to fulfill these OT Scriptures. These donkey predictions are the Father's instructions to him, and he's obeying the Scriptures. They are God telling him what to do.

Jacob pictured the great ruler tying up his donkey to vine to start celebrating. Jesus untied the donkey, but not to celebrate. In Zechariah the king comes in victorious and triumphant, but that's not how Jesus enters. Jesus knows how this will end. In Luke's story, while Jesus was on the donkey, he started to cry, wept over Jerusalem, because it will suffer so much for rejecting him.

Jesus knows he's the ruler Jacob had in mind, the king Zechariah had in mind, and he's announcing this as clearly and gently as he can. Does anybody get it? Not really.

His followers think he's the Christ, and have a happy afternoon. But John's Gospel tells us that even the disciples did not understand that Jesus fulfilled prophecy until later.

On that day, no one except Jesus understood about the donkey prophecies. God said, "Give them my message, whether they listen or fail to listen." He obeyed God's voice in Scripture, and gently announced himself. He was not always so soft-spoken, but he was on that day, and often.

## What did the Large Crowd of Followers Think?

This was pilgrimage time. Moses instructed Israelites, no matter where they lived, to travel to Jerusalem to worship at the one central place for three feasts every year. Our story takes place in the days leading up to Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, so Jews from all over the place are streaming into Jerusalem. Jerusalem got to be about four times normal size in these times.

Pilgrimage was happy time. People met old friends and relatives, and celebrated together as they walked toward Jerusalem. So Jesus and his disciples and other followers are a part of this big gathering. Jesus has always had a crowd of Galilean followers, but on this trip it has gotten bigger and bigger. In the previous story they went through Jericho, and it is a large crowd.

The twelve disciples, and his regular Galilean followers, a larger group of men and women, they all are sure that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus has told them repeatedly that he will be rejected and executed, but none of them have gotten that. How many of the new followers think Jesus is the Christ? Don't know, but it seems quite a few at least hope for that.

It says that the disciples put their cloaks on the donkey, and that a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road in front of him. There's a story in 2 Kings 9 about spreading cloaks. 2 Kgs 9. In Israel, the commander of the army was a man named Jehu. God was displeased with the king of Israel, and God sent a prophet to anoint commander Jehu as the new king of Israel.

The prophet took Jehu aside to tell him this and anoint him. The army officers asked Jehu afterward what the prophet had said. Jehu put them off at first, but they pressed him, so he told them: "The prophet told me, 'This is what the Lord says: I anoint you king over Israel.'"

*They quickly took their cloaks, and spread them out under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, "Jehu is king." (2 Kg 9:13).* His officers and soldiers make an instant throne out of their cloaks. What they are doing is symbolically putting themselves under him.

A person's cloak symbolizes the whole person. He is over them, they put themselves under him. Spreading out their cloaks under him means they submit themselves to him. "Jehu is king!" The two disciples put their cloaks on the donkey, and others put them on the road for Jesus to ride on. In this crowd of followers, they believe Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, and they are submitting.

But it is hard to say what the large crowd really believes. When Jesus on the donkey and the shouting crowd get to Jerusalem, the whole city is shaken. Remember what happened when the wise men came to Jerusalem, in Matt 2? They asked, "where is the one born king of the Jews?" Herod was troubled about he heard about this, it says, and the whole city was troubled with him.

Same thing here, and Matthew hopes we will remember. The whole city was shaken because the king had come! But when the whole city asks, "who is this?" the crowds answer: "Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." That's not the right answer. It's disappointing.

The right answer is, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the king of the Jews!” Later in the temple, the children around Jesus say, “Hosanna to the son of David!” That’s good. But at the end of Matthew 21, the religious leaders want to arrest Jesus, but are afraid, because the crowd thinks Jesus is a prophet.

So, what is the very large crowd of followers thinking? I don’t know. They are certainly acting as if Jesus is the Christ, praising God and shouting “hosanna to the son of David,” and laying their cloaks down for him to ride on. They are doing the right things. Some of them know he’s the Christ, but quite a few just seem just excited about the whole event.

The important thing is that Jesus truly was the great ruler from Judah, and he did actually come into Jerusalem, righteous and lowly and riding on a donkey. And this is important: the people with him treated him like a king. Jesus came in as God had instructed, and the crowd responded well. They treated him as their king should be treated.

But back to Jesus. Why did Jesus ride a donkey into Jerusalem?

Jesus was obediently and gently offering himself to Jerusalem as her king. Jesus was obediently and gently giving Jerusalem this message: “I am your king. I am the king God has sent you.”

He’s obeying the voice of God in the Scriptures, which showed how he would enter Jerusalem. Will he be accepted? No, he knows it won’t work. But God told Ezekiel, “you give them my message, whether they listen or fail to listen; they are a rebellious people.” So Jesus sent the message God had given him to send: he openly offered himself to Jerusalem as her king.

It was a gentle offering. He did it with an usual action, riding into the city on a donkey, but he did not say a word. And the crowds around him, no matter how much they understood, did respond well. They lay down their cloaks, and said “Hosanna to the son of David!” So between riding the donkey and the praising crowds, Jerusalem did get the real picture.

For Jesus, was riding the donkey into Jerusalem a success? Did he accomplish what he wanted? In a sense, no. In Luke, he wept over Jerusalem while riding the donkey. Jesus knew how this would go, how Jerusalem would suffer later for rejecting him. He was disappointed and sad.

But God had told Jesus, “Offer yourself to Jerusalem as the king I’m giving them, whether they listen or fail to listen,” and Jesus did so. In that way Jesus accomplished what he set out to do, and the ride into Jerusalem was a complete success.

So, my brothers and sisters, what shall we say to these things? This is a story about how God acts, and how Jesus our Lord acts, how they do things, how they accomplish their purposes. In a quiet and understated way, this is a powerful story about our Lord, the one we trust and follow. This way of acting resulted in him being King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Jesus still goes around the world like this, gently offering himself as king, whether people listen or fail to listen. So let's always be those who put our coats on the road, and let's mean it.

And when people ask who this is, we will say, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who has full rights to my life." This we will say, whether they listen or fail to listen. Amen.

PRAYER: Jesus our Lord, thank you for opening our eyes. We can read this story and get it. No one can say "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit, and you have taken us there. Thank you for the Spirit, who gives us eyes to see what kind of King you are, and who leads us to put our cloaks under your feet. The obedience of the nations belongs to you, and we put our cloaks down with joy. We have the best King ever. And when we get a chance to say who you are, may we not waffle, Lord. You are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and you have full rights to our lives. With your help, we will say this freely and clearly. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us, and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement, and good hope, encourage our hearts and strengthen us, in every good deed and every good word. Amen (2Th2)

Go God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.