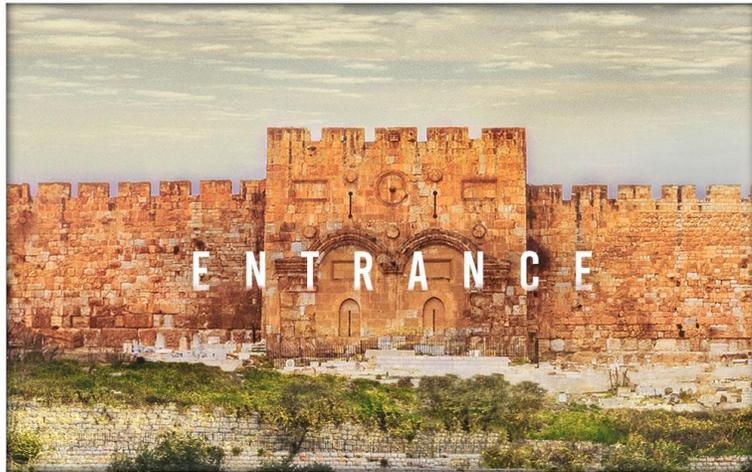


“Expectations – Entrance”

Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:1–11

The day has come for all to see just who this Jesus really is.



And so we come to another Holy Week – the most important week in the Christian calendar – beginning with Palm Sunday, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He probably entered the city through the Eastern Gate of the Temple Mount, and, amid waving palms and shouts of joy and

acclamation, made his way up to the vast Temple courtyards. The temple that Herod built was twice the height of the Dome of the Rock that sits there today. Two dozen football fields could fit on the Temple Mount. Jews coming there from the countryside to be part of the Passover festival would surely have been overwhelmed every time they climbed the monumental Southern Steps (see the disciples’ reaction to the grand construction in Mark 13:1-2).

Waiting for so long

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. Slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). Israel’s greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). But . . . four hundred years after David’s death, Jerusalem burned. The temple built by David’s son, Solomon, reduced to ruins. The Ark of the Covenant gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people exiled. Indeed, to many Israelites it must have seemed as if God had abandoned them—his patience finally gone.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Yes, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were “kings” only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, the Jews had traded one oppressor for another. They had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come, such as in today’s passage from Zechariah. This true king to come would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, when all the world would see that the Jews’ confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God’s king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God’s kingdom, more than a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar. And they all met a bad end.

Zechariah

Zechariah was a prophet working in Judah in the years immediately after King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home from exile in Babylonia. Thus, Zechariah is among the “post-exilic” prophets.

The book of Zechariah contains prophetic writings and visions aimed at encouraging the Jews to rebuild the temple and stay true to God. Zechariah brought them God’s promises that the future of Jerusalem and the Jews was bright, and that, one day, Israel’s king would return to Jerusalem in triumph.

Zechariah is one of the twelve “minor” prophets, whose writings close our Old Testament. It is important to realize that “minor” refers only to the length of these books, not their importance.

Jerusalem at Passover

Ancient Jerusalem was a sprawling city with a population of 60,000 or so. But at festival time, the city's population would swell to nearly 200,000. And no festival was bigger or more well-attended than Passover.

In Jesus' day, Passover presented a real problem for the Roman occupiers. Not only was the city stuffed with throngs of Jews who resented the Romans as easily as they breathed, Passover itself was emotionally charged. After all, Passover celebrated the Exodus from Egypt, when God had saved the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors. It certainly did not take much imagination to lump the hated Romans in with Pharaoh. The typical Jew on the street anxiously awaited the day when God would free them from the Romans just as he had freed them from Egypt.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, would come to Jerusalem himself each year for the duration of Passover to oversee the peacekeeping. Pilate's headquarters were in the Antonia Fortress, overlooking the temple and its expansive courtyards. Roman guards would stand atop the fortress walls as they kept a nervous eye on the crowds below.

Pilate had never helped matters much. For example, on his arrival in Judea he ordered that the Roman standards (symbols of Caesar's rule) be brought into Jerusalem, violating a long-standing agreement between the Jews and the Romans. Pilate backed down only when it became clear that his action would trigger a major revolt.

Jesus was not born into a peaceful world!

The true King

Sometime around the seventeenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius, (AD 30 or so), one Jew, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, this Jew from Galilee, named Jesus, had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the Kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy not vengeance, and peace not rebellion. Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike the prophets of old, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God's people. Still, not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, but Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God's people.

The gospel writers tell us that Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, as would have his fellow Galileans. Galilee is several days journey north of Jerusalem. Galilean pilgrims going to Jerusalem for festivals, such as Passover, preferred a route that brought them southward along the Jordan river valley to Jericho and then into Jerusalem. Though Jericho is only about twelve miles from Jerusalem, it lies 800 feet below sea level, while Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level. Jesus and the other pilgrims would have faced quite a climb as they made their way up to the city. Though the climb may have been physically fatiguing, it would have been spiritually exhilarating. As they climbed upward toward Jerusalem for Passover, they climbed toward the city of David and the great temple to remember the time of Israel's freedom.

Approaching the city at Passover would have been exciting for any Jew, but for Jesus' followers, it must have been electrifying; they were climbing toward the kingdom. They expected that Jesus would be received into the city as royalty, as the returning king, as the Messiah. They expected that, beginning in Jerusalem, all the world would see that Jesus of Nazareth was God's anointed king, the one who would end Caesar's kingdom and inaugurate the arrival of God's kingdom.

And Jesus did all he could to drive home the message that, indeed, he was the long-awaited Messiah. He used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Zechariah told of God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but the crowds certainly didn't. They went outside the city

walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's

oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They waved palm branches,¹ symbols of abundance and thanks.

The enthusiasm of the crowds was lost on no one. The Pharisees, the keepers of the old way, were obviously frustrated with the whole thing, for they muttered to themselves, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him” (John 12:19).

However, Jesus knew that the enthusiasm of the crowds would soon falter. He knew that unless he gave up his course and abandoned the vocation given him by the Father, his confrontation with the Jewish leadership and the Romans would soon come to a head.

Later in the week, after more confrontations with those who would not hear his words of warning, Jesus would be arrested, tried, and hung to die on a Roman cross, a humiliating death reserved for those who challenged Roman authority. Rather than the triumphant returning king entering Jerusalem, Jesus would wear a crown of thorns under a mocking sign, “King of the Jews.” Yet, defying all appearances, it was God’s victory, won on a cross.

Matthew highlights for us the irony implicit in Jesus’ last pilgrimage to the holy city. The Son of David enters David’s city, but the only throne he finds is a cross. The city that should have welcomed him with its fullest homage refused to accept its gentle king. Shaken as at the news of his birth (2:3), the city sides again with the Herods of this world who maintain the established order. 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 the superficiality 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).²

At last

And so it comes full circle. A dozen centuries after the Exodus and the institution of the Passover, palms are waved as Jesus enters Jerusalem to begin the celebration of the Passover, the meal of freedom from bondage to sin and slavery.

It was real. It happened. God’s people had waited so long and, at last, God had stepped into history to do for his people what they were unable to do for themselves, ushering in God’s kingdom. Though all creation would still await the final consummation of the kingdom, its arrival meant nothing would ever be the same again.

Now, another two millennia later, we still await the consummation of the kingdom, and we strive to live lives fully consonant with God’s kingdom, lives marked by compassion and joy, kindness and mercy, putting the interests of others ahead of our own. We cannot do otherwise. How could we? Jesus is Lord!

Daily Bible Readings *More stories on Palm Sunday and the days that followed*

Monday	Matthew 21:12-17	Jesus cleanses the temple, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah.
Tuesday	Matthew 21:33-46	The parable of the wicked tenants
Wednesday	Matthew 22:15-33	Jesus is challenged on taxes and resurrection.
Thursday	Matthew 26:17-26	The last supper and Jesus in Gethsemane
Friday	Matthew 26:47-75	Jesus’ arrest and trial before the high priest
Saturday	Matthew 27	Pilate, the crucifixion, and Jesus’ burial

¹ John is the only Gospel writer to tell us that the leaves are palm branches. Jews used palms in the Festival of Tabernacles, a time of harvest thanksgiving remembering the wanderings in the wilderness. See Leviticus 23:39-43.

² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 240.