



## “Rerouting: Palm Sunday”

*Matthew 5:43-48; Matthew 21:1-11*

### ***Ride on, King Jesus!***

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says. Our response might be “Easy for you to say!” But then Jesus not only taught these words, but he also lived them. Today is Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rides into Jerusalem as an arriving king, to shouts of joy and acclamation. But by Friday, the crowds will release the criminal Barabbas rather than Jesus. And our Lord will be crucified. Even as he neared death, Jesus asked

forgiveness for those who persecuted and crucified him. He knew what we often forget: that we are to seek God’s favor, not the world’s approval; even when it is hard and seemingly impossible. Eugene Boring expressed this well:

When the crowds cry “Hosanna to the Son of David!” and “This is the prophet,” they use the right words, but they still miss the point. They have all of the notes and none of the music. They have the theology straight, but they will still end up rejecting Jesus and calling for his death (27:20–23).

Matthew is striking a familiar note: Knowing the truth is not the same thing as doing the truth (7:21). What one social psychologist said of university students is also true of the kingdom: “It is possible to make an A+ in the course on ethics and still flunk life.”<sup>1</sup>

In the same way, it is possible to know much about God, but not know God at all, still seeking the world’s acclamation rather than God’s grace and mercy. Palm Sunday marks the *beginning* of the week leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. We must *not* be in too much of a hurry to get to Easter, or we will fail to see its cost and the price even of our own salvation. I hope you will come to the Maundy Thursday service and the Good Friday service. May you live in the fullness of Holy Week this year.

### ***Longing for a king***

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, 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, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people were in exile. The king of Israel was dead. Indeed, to many Israelites it must have seemed as if God had abandoned them.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, 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. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come, such as in today’s passage from Zechariah. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, 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

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 404.

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.

The true King In 27AD 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, 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. 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.

Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But, as he had done so often, Jesus 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. Leon Morris helps us grasp the significance of this choice:

But the important point in the prophecy is that this King is meek. When the prophet says that he comes riding on an ass, he is contrasting him with "the chariot," "the war horse," and "the battle bow" (Zech. 9:10). It is the fact that the King is a man of peace that is distinctive. In antiquity a king would not normally enter his capital riding on a donkey. He would ride in proudly, on a war-horse, or perhaps he would march in at the head of his troops. An ass was the animal of a man of peace; it would be used by a priest or a merchant or an eminent citizen. But the ass Jesus rode was no well-bred animal meant for the convenience of the wealthy (cf. Judg. 5:10). It is specifically called a beast of burden; it was a lowly animal. A king on an ass was almost a contradiction in terms, though, of course, sometimes in times of peace a king would use an ass (cf. 1 Kings 1:33). That Jesus rode into the city in the way he did was a significant affirmation of his character and his purpose. The pilgrims might shout their acclaims and think of a king who would fight against the Romans and throw them out of the country, but Jesus viewed himself as the King of peace. He had accepted the salutation "Son of David," and there is no doubt that he agreed that he was the messianic King. But he did not interpret messianic kingship as most of his contemporaries did. He did not view it in terms of armies and battles and conquests. He saw it in terms of peace and love and compassion. Riding on an ass was important. The mention of the prophecy that was fulfilled right at the beginning of this incident (and not after Matthew has related what happened) may be meant to indicate that Jesus consciously fulfilled the words of the prophet. This does not mean that the disciples understood what Jesus was doing; John explicitly tells us that they did not until Jesus was "glorified" (John 12:16). But Jesus knew what he was about, and his action proclaimed boldly to all who had eyes to see that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, but a Messiah of a very different stamp from any that the deliriously happy crowds had imagined.<sup>2</sup>

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,<sup>3</sup> symbols of abundance and thanks.

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 520–521.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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. But of course, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way to the cross. Thanks be to God!

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." God's victory won on a cross. A world turned upside down.

### ***At last***

A dozen centuries after the Exodus and the first Passover, palms are waved as Jesus enters Jerusalem to begin the celebration of yet another Passover, this 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.

Even 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!