

What Kind of Peace?

Matthew 21:1-11

There is a famous story of Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the great explorers for, and perhaps suitors of, Queen Elizabeth I in the 1500s. On one occasion, he was with the queen when she was walking through London, and they came to a place where rainwater had made the ground muddy and messy. He quickly took off his cloak and placed it on the ground so the queen could walk over without getting mud on her feet. The story may or may not be true--though for some years Raleigh was certainly Elizabeth's favorite. But the story illustrates a point of this incident we have just read in Matthew 21. The Raleigh story became famous partly because it's not the sort of thing that happens every day. He made a very special gesture, especially if the cloak (as it likely was not in Raleigh's case) the only cloak you've got. It says, quite clearly, that you are celebrating and valuing this person about as highly as you can. As we might say for such, *"I'd give you the shirt off my back."* (NT Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 2, p. 66).

In our passage, most of this crowd with Jesus probably didn't have second cloaks, but spread them on the road anyway. Those who knew their ancient Israelite history may have remembered that when one of Israel's famous kings of old--Jehu by name--was proclaimed king in defiance of the existing one, his followers spread their cloaks under his feet as a sign of loyalty, *"blew trumpets and shouted, 'Jehu is king!'"* (2 Kgs 9:13).

This crowd with Jesus also waved palm branches they'd cut to make a celebratory procession for Jesus. This, too, carried "royal" implications. Like our heroic George Washington is to us, the heroic Judas Maccabaeus--some 160 years before Jesus--arrived in Jerusalem after conquering the pagan, Greek armies that had oppressed the Israelites.

He, too, was welcomed into the city by a crowd-waving palm branches (2 Maccabees 12). To add to the excitement, the crowd here shouted and sang songs, or psalms as we call them, and royal chants in this parade around Jesus. Shouting to him "*son of David*" was as explicit as you could get in hailing him King. For this was the city which King David had made his capital a thousand years earlier. But by Jesus' day, for nearly 500 years, the Jews had been waiting, praying, and sometimes fighting for another king like David to arrive and save them from what was their most cruel foreign occupation and oppression--Rome. They believed Jesus to be the sort of king they wanted, and hoped he would be. Surely, they thought, this was the moment! That is what all this is about.

Now when we think and read of this event on that spring day on the eastern road into Jerusalem, our minds go quickly to the parade-like character of the event or perhaps the ways its been done with children in church. We imagine Jesus and the disciples and other pilgrim travelers moving along in a spirit of revelry. They are waving their palm branches. They are shouting praises to Jesus that are expressions of hope and acclamation that Jesus is the longed-for King to save the Jews from the Romans. That's what all that "*Hosanna*"--which means "*Save us!*"--and "*Son of David*"--which means King or Messiah is about. We read and hear these words and we think religion. But this event was as much political as religious. In fact, in that Jewish world, you really couldn't separate politics from religion. For to shout and carry on about a "king" as they were doing was to challenge the power that is in place, and that power was Rome, and as well as the Jewish establishment that complied willingly with Rome.

This event--this so-called "triumphal entry"--happened at the beginning of the celebration of Passover. And Passover was the most important of all the Jewish

celebrations during the year. It was the week-long celebration in which everyone who possibly could, went to Jerusalem to recall in solemn liturgies and joyous feasting. They partied and rejoiced how centuries earlier God had led his people out of Egypt, out of slavery, through the desert, through the sea, through the wilderness, and finally into the Promised Land, where they still were to that day. But that wasn't the problem.

Though they had a history as an independent people for some 600 years, for the last 500 years they had been ruled by others--foreigners, pagans, immoral and idolatrous Gentiles. Now they were ruled by Rome, whom they hated but had to get along with. Nonetheless, their hope was that God would one day remove the Romans--judge them severely really--and restore Israel to greatness over all nations. So every Passover was both a memory of the past and hope that God would do it again for them--free them in their own land. The Romans knew this, too, and every Passover, they brought in plenty of extra troops to eliminate any possible act or acts of violent revolution which the Jews from time to time tried to get going. Before Jesus and after him, there were quite a few "would-be Messiahs" who tried to lead such revolutions, and the Romans always crushed them into defeat. Nonetheless, the Jews hoped.

So into that highly-charged religious/political atmosphere, on what was Sunday before Passover--here came Jesus and the disciples making their way on the road that ascends the eastern side of the Mount of Olives, then descends into the city of Jerusalem. We know from John's Gospel (11) that only a few weeks before, Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. That happened at Bethany, just two miles away from this spot on Mt. Olivet, and Jesus had just been with him, and his sisters Mary and Martha, the previous Friday night. The news of that miracle--the most recent and certainly most

astounding-- had made its way to all the homes and gossip centers in Jerusalem.

So, when Jesus appears and is identified by the crowds of people--coming from all directions into the city--you can just imagine the exciting things that were being said about him. Matthew says in those last two verses: *“And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred [--“quaked” literally], saying, ‘Who is this?’ And the crowds said, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.’”* Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. And there were many Jews named Joshua at the time. But here, of course, they mean *“Joshua of Nazareth--THAT ONE, the miracle worker, the prophet-teacher we’ve all heard about.”* Now Matthew also means for us to connect Jesus to the prophet of which Moses spoke in Deuteronomy 18:15, *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me...listen to him.”* And that command--if you remember from a few weeks ago--is the very same command God spoke to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:5). *“Listen to him!”*

But now we must ask: Why does Jesus ride into the city in this manner, riding on a donkey? Think about it. Jesus is not weak or tired from walking. But he chooses to ride into the city. He sends ahead two disciples to retrieve a donkey and its colt so he can ride in. This was very significant. Every other time either the disciples or crowds get ex-cited that Jesus might be the king God is sending--the Messiah--Jesus either has to correct them --Remember to Peter, *“Yes, Peter, I am Messiah but not your way!”* (Mt 16:22-23); or he just shuts them down, *“Don’t tell anyone this!”* (Mk 9:30; see also John 6). But this time, he both welcomes the acclamation as King/ Messiah, and interprets it. Matthew is explicit that Jesus did this in fulfillment of the prophecy, Zechariah 9:9: *“Tell the daughter of Zion [city of Jerusalem, the symbol of the nation],*

Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

What Jesus does here is a strategic declaratory action. It's a powerful symbol Jesus enacts. Matthew is telling us by the Zechariah quotation that Jesus is saying --“*I am King, I am Messiah; but understand, I am King in my own way.*” That is, if you want to convey the message you were a militant revolutionary, you would not ride a donkey but a beautiful prancing steed, a war horse, or be in a chariot pulled by such. When Julius Caesar returned from his Gallic wars and others, he entered Rome on a white stallion, the symbol of victory, power, and great might, the crowds of Rome cheering enthusiastically.

But Jesus enters Jerusalem on a pack-animal, the lowly but noble donkey. The donkey was not an animal to charge the enemy and conquer one's foes. It was a sure-footed animal, a dependable animal, an animal that is ready for the burdens of work, but compared to the horse, lowly and humble. Now kings and ambassadors DID ride on donkeys, sometimes, but not on missions of war, but peace. The Zechariah prophecy itself is: “*Behold, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he; humble and riding on a donkey...*” Now Matthew leaves out this militant “triumphant” phrase! Matthew--nor the other gospels--do not portray anything like a militant “triumphal entry,” which is what we still call it. Instead, they give us a “modest entry,” a peaceful entry. Martin Luther's insight here is: “*[Matthew] wants to entice us to faith, above all else....Look at him [Jesus]! He rides no stallion... and he comes not with fearful pomp and power, but sits on a donkey, which is no war animal, but which is ready for burdens of work that will help human beings.*”-- (in Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, II, p. 749).

Now in the moment when Jesus does this, all of this is lost in the moment on the disciples and the crowd. How could they understand, really? We know that he has come to Jerusalem, not to be enthroned like David, King Jehu, Judas Maccabaeus, or any other Israelite king--much less Caesar. But rather, he has come to be rejected and put to death. The path to his kingship is through rejection, suffering, and death. And that was not on anyone's radar, but his. The meaning Jesus attaches to this so-called "triumphal entry"--as we call it--was quite different from the meaning everyone at the time was wanting to see in it. In fact no one but Jesus really understood what this event was about.

The people see in Jesus a certain kind of hope. They have an earnest hope of their own making, though not without some real justification. Jesus is there--true king and true king of peace. But it is not the peace, nor a way of peace, they can see. They want Jesus to ride into the city and become the sort of king they want him to be. Give us peace, now! Kick out the oppressive bad guys, the Romans, now! Save our lives now! Fix our nation now. But, just help us, now! These are our natural human responses. There is truth in looking to Jesus to make things right--to bring peace to them--and to us.

But at the same time Jesus answers in his own way. He will bring peace to the world his way, not ours--not then and not now. When dealing with Jesus, we don't get necessarily what we want. The people wanted a prophet, but this prophet would tell them that their city was under God's imminent judgment, and to put their hopes in their own nation was both foolish and disastrous. They wanted a Messiah, but this Messiah was going to be enthroned by the awful cross of shameful execution, and call his followers to do likewise. They wanted to be rescued from evil and oppression, but Jesus was going

to rescue them from evil in its full depths within themselves, not just the surface evil of Roman occupation and exploitation by the wealthy classes. Precisely because Jesus says ‘yes’ to their--and our--desires at the deepest level, he will have to say ‘no’ or ‘wait’, Even “you’re wrong” to the desires they--and we--also know and often live by.

That’s the thing about Jesus. He comes in peace, but that often results in our own disappointment and upset. Once you invite Jesus to help you, he usually will do so more thoroughly than you imagine, more deeply than you perhaps want. If you invite an accountant to help you with your income tax return, you mustn’t be surprised if she goes through all your financial affairs very thoroughly, to make sure she’s got everything right.

We’re fickle like that. We want help, but usually on our terms. Jesus doesn’t come into the world, into Jerusalem or into our lives on our terms.

As C. S. Lewis wonderfully puts it: *“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At firsts, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of. He throws out a new wing here, puts on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you being made into a decent little cottage. But God is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”--Mere Christianity, p. 174.*

The story of Jesus’ triumphal, or if we get Matthew’s point--“modest” though

misunderstood entry into Jerusalem, is an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God's complete answer. The bad news is that the crowds--including us--are going to be disappointed. Sometimes in coming to Jesus, we are going to be initially disappointed. But the good news is this disappointment, though difficult and some-times agonizing, is at the surface level. No we can hold on to the disappointment, or we can hold on to Christ--sometimes by the skin of our teeth! We can either give up on Christ as he enters the "Jerusalem" of our lives, or we can surrender our disappointment and offer Jesus our very selves to learn his better way. But if you think about it, Jesus embodied here--and all the way to the cross--what he had been teaching all along as the vocation he had marked both for himself and those who follow him in the Sermon on the Mount--siding with the poor, comforting the mourners, turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies, and praying for them even as they nailed him to the cross.

Jesus most certainly enacted a powerful truth here--the truth of the arrival of the One who will rule God's people--and the world--by his peace. So here he rides, and here He sits. He is the King after all. But he rides in humility. He is riding to the cross. As he himself said to the disciples, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,"* (Mt 20:25-28). And so he does.

Jesus' arrival at the great city was indeed the moment when God's kingdom-salvation was coming ever closer. The "Hosannas" were justified, though not for the reasons they had supposed. *"The stone that the builders rejected," says the psalmist "has*

become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing." But it waits--until we understand--to be "*marvelous in our eyes,*" (Ps 118:22-23). Greenville (MS) native and writer William A. Percy put it right well in the final stanza of a hymn he wrote some years ago: "*The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet, brothers, pray for but one thing--the marvelous peace of God.*"-- "*They Cast Their Nets,*" *The Hymnbook*, 1955, #421). Yes, "*pray for just one thing, the marvelous peace of God.*" Amen.