

PALM SUNDAY

Matthew 21:1-11

St Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday contains slight differences from the other Gospel writers and these could be either human error or they are points he wishes to make.

When Jesus approaches Bethphage, He sends James and John to a nearby village to commandeer a donkey *and* a colt for Him to ride into Jerusalem. This entry was a well-staged affair. There are no signs of a triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the trappings of a victorious warrior. It is a humble, but a royal entry. The donkey is the royal beast of King David. When both Absalom and Mephibosheth launched their campaigns to oust David from his throne, they rode on donkeys as a sign of their claim to kingship. When David sent Solomon to be anointed king at the hands of Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, he rode on David's royal donkey (1 Kings 1:32-40).

Jesus approached Jerusalem from the east, from Bethphage and the Mount of Olives in the Jordan Valley, and this is the direction from which some Jews believed the Messiah would approach the city. But why does Matthew mention two animals when the other Gospel writers only mention one? Jesus wasn't a circus performer riding two animals at the same time, so what is Matthew telling us? He writes, "***Tell the daughter of Zion***. Behold your king comes to you, meek and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the son of a beast of burden" (Zechariah 9:9). However, the verse in Zechariah begins, "***Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion***." Matthew replaces these words with words from Isaiah (62:11) which says, "Say to the Daughter of Zion, behold your salvation comes." In making this change, Matthew turns Jesus' arrival from one of rejoicing to a command to deliver a message to Jerusalem.

Jesus enters the city humbly, open to the will of God. Yet He challenges the city to recognise its true king and saviour. Jesus does not come to rescue Jerusalem from her Roman enemies; He comes to confront its people with their sins.

So why two animals? If this is not a mistake, Matthew is perhaps saying that they represent two aspects of Jesus' identity. Mounted on a donkey, Jesus enters as the royal Son of David, the Messiah. The colt is the son of a pack animal, so Jesus also comes as the Suffering Servant filled with God's Spirit, who will proclaim justice and salvation to the Gentiles (Mt 12:15-19). He is the one who will save the many.

The crowd that follow Jesus into Jerusalem shout, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord," words we repeat in every Mass welcoming Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar. They describe Jesus as the Messiah. The residents of Jerusalem, who must be distinguished from the crowd, were not so impressed with the drama unfolding before them. Matthew says they were troubled and disturbed. This is the second time he tells us in his gospel that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were troubled. The first time was when the Wise Men from the East asked Herod where the King of Israel had been born, and that was Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David. Now they are troubled as the king enters the city of David's throne.

Jesus the King, Suffering Servant and High Priest, enters the city where God's prophets had been murdered and where the leaders were now laying plans to kill the Son of the God that they believed they were protecting. The parable of the Vineyard is being enacted before their eyes.

The scene is now set for us to begin our journey through Holy Week, following the events through the reading of Scripture and celebrating the liturgies. In doing this we are not simply reading or hearing a story that happened some 2000 years ago. This story is the story of those who came *before* Jesus. It is the story *of* Jesus and it is also *our* story. It is our journey of salvation in which God reveals His glory and lovingly reconciles to Himself those of us who trust and love Him.

Let us enter Jerusalem.

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