

Matthew 21:1-11

Lowly pomp

The prophet, or your king?

Today is Pentecost Sunday, as I mentioned earlier. I have to confess that I really didn't realise that until the middle of the week. I guess I'm just not greatly tuned into what they call "**The Church Calendar**". Of course we do **Easter** and **Christmas**, and maybe even a touch of **Advent**, but that's because that's how this whole society works, with national holidays and all. But the specifics of things like Trinity Sunday and Ascension Day ... don't quite hit the spot for me.

And I think that's OK, because in the NT it says we're allowed to have different takes on things like this:

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord.

(Romans 14:5-6)

So I'm not to criticise someone who really wants to do something special to mark Pentecost. It's not right to presume that someone like that is superstitious, or to look down on that as a mere traditionalist. And it's quite OK, too, if these dates that mean so much to some *just don't* to me. I'm not to be regarded as unspiritual on that account. And remember, actually, that there's nothing in the NT saying that we *should* mark any of these days in any special way at all - and that includes Christmas and Easter, too.

And it's the same with this passage we've read together. For some people, this would be a passage to visit on the Sunday before Easter: *Palm* Sunday, some people will still call it, because of that particular verse we saw.

Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

(Matthew 21:8)

It's only John who specifies the kind of tree:

So they took branches of palm trees ...

(John 12:13)

But that's where the day gets its specific name - whether we want to have a sermon from one of the four Gospel accounts of this event each Palm Sunday or not. For me, as you can see, it's simply the next section in the book.

But as we turn the corner into chapter 21 of Matthew's gospel, I think we can detect a picking up of the pace. The events and words of the previous chapter, we perhaps feel could have been said at more or less any time over the previous few

months of Jesus' life, but we know now - if we have read on and know what is coming - that we have finally entered the last week of his life.

Hopefully next Sunday afternoon, we'll be on the road up to visit our daughter Jo and her family in Kent. And probably avoiding the A303 route on a Sunday afternoon, because we've seen a few serious **traffic jams** on that road on Sunday afternoons over the years. So it will be the **M5-M4** route, more likely.

But after several hundred miles of just proceeding along monotonous **motorway** that looks all very similar, as you start to approach London, it's no longer just green fields stretching around on each side of the road. You know you're nearing your destination - or at least the start of the M25 section of it - as the view becomes **more urban**. To me, driving along that section, it's almost as if you can start to hear a drum-beat to the journey, grabbing my attention, slowly picking up the pace, as you approach the nation's capital.

And "Holy Week", if you want to call it that, does seem to start so gloriously, with this "Triumphal Entry", as you'll see it called in many Bibles. In John's Gospel, it's connected with Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. There is excitement already in the air.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

(John 12:1)

And John points out that there is an inevitable collision ahead, because of that.

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

(John 12:9-11)

But at the start of the week, with Jesus surrounded by this adoring crowd, he's safe ... though only temporarily. And today we're looking through Matthew's analysis of that "Triumphal Entry". The chief priests may have made up their minds already, but for everybody else in this scenario, they're still working on the question,

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?"

(Matthew 21:10)

And the question for us today is going to boil down to this: is the answer in the following verse good enough?

And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

(Matthew 21:11)

Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem is greeted with excitement, but incomplete understanding

So we start with Jesus approaching Jerusalem from that eastern side of the city, where you’ve got the village of Bethany and the Mount of Olives, and further down, Jericho - where Jesus healed the blind men we read about last week.

And to the east of Jerusalem there’s probably something more like what we’d call a hamlet, by the name of Bethphage. The site of it has been lost now, but that’s clearly enough where it must have been.

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, ..

(Matthew 21:1)

And Jesus has obviously considered what is ahead of him, and what is about to happen right now. He and the disciples could easily enough have continued up the hill into Jerusalem on foot. It’s not as if they were *all* going to be mounted, so they’ll not be moving any faster. But for this last mile or so - probably no more than that - there is a special significance. A specific prophecy, it turns out, that needs to be fulfilled.

This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ...

(Matthew 21:4)

So Jesus initiates the event with a job for a couple of his disciples.

... then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me...”

(Matthew 21:1-2)

And we have to ask ourselves the question, *Is this some special, supernatural kind of knowledge that Jesus has been granted here?* Or is just totally humanly explicable? Is he already familiar with the village, and maybe even the owner? Is this something that has been pre-arranged, a long-standing agreement that this person’s animals would be available whenever Jesus might call?

I don’t think that we need to presume something miraculous there. But then again, a donkey *and* a colt - that colt being important ... that is bit more than just *oh, that guy always has a donkey or two tethered at the front of his house*. So I don’t know, to be honest, whether we need to invoke something more than just normal, natural knowledge here, or not. What is clearly more remarkable is what follows on. After all, would *you* just let someone walk up out of the blue and drive off with your car?

“... If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.”

(Matthew 21:3)

Isn't that a fascinating thing to say? It has to imply that there is someone in this village who recognises something very fundamental about Jesus. We've got that verse over in one of the letters:

... no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 12:3)

It's one of those key marks of being a real follower of Jesus. Not just mouthing the words, but recognising his rights over our lives.

Now I'm not saying that we need to follow every idea that pops into our heads, as if just any hare-brained notion is automatically God's guidance. Neither am I saying that we must automatically presume that someone else saying that they think they know God's will for you is going to be right. But if, after careful, extended, balanced, Scriptural, prayerful consideration, you are convinced that Jesus Christ is laying claim upon you to do something specific, something costly, something risky, from a human point of view ... something that your neighbours and friends and maybe even family might not understand ...

... are you willing to say, Yes ... Yes, *Lord* Jesus Christ. What I have, and who I am, is at *your* disposal?

Now the words of what Jesus said here are a bit ambiguous. That “he will send them at once”

“... If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.”

(Matthew 21:3)

... *could* be Jesus saying that the owner will release them to the disciples immediately, or it *could* be part of what the disciples are to say to the owner, that Jesus will send the donkeys back as soon as he's finished with them. But whichever, the important thing is what this young donkey is going to symbolise. We're given a clue by Matthew:

This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying,...

(Matthew 21:4)

And that's important to Matthew. He has said this kind of thing several times during this book. He started off by claiming that Jesus is the promised and prophesied fulfilment of God's words in the OT:

... Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

(Matthew 1:1)

And it's as if he pauses from time to time to remind us of this brief. Look, prophecy fulfilled! Look, another prophecy fulfilled! See, *this is the one!* And here's the quote from the OT - Zechariah - slightly different as it's been translated twice on the way into English:

“Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”
(Matthew 21:5)

Of course, if you're a Jewish reader there, your mind would flick back to the original words there, which Matthew has trimmed slightly, too:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:9)

And I wonder if those words that Matthew chose to miss out, the “righteous and having salvation” phrase, would stand out by omission. Is he saying, *Yes, that's precisely the question! Just what IS this Jesus bringing? Salvation? Liberation? Liberation from what? From the Roman occupying forces, or from sin?*

So here's that question again. Just who is this coming? And, on account of that, what has he come to do? And, on account of that, how are we going to respond?

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?”
(Matthew 21:10)

It certainly looks as if the disciples are seeing this as something special. They don't just do what Jesus said to do, but start following their own initiative. Maybe *they* have remembered that prophecy from the Scriptures about a *your king* coming, do you think? So a king has to be greeted with some kind of celebration, surely?

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.
(Matthew 21:6-7)

Not a huge honour, but the excitement is becoming infectious! This certainly no royal chariot! But, with only so much space on the back of two donkeys, instead they produce their own makeshift version of a **Red Carpet**

Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.
(Matthew 21:8)

And here they might not just be harking back to what we would think of as Scripture, but something from more recent Jewish history that was recorded in the Apocrypha, the book of 2 Maccabees (you won't often get me putting *Apocrypha* words up on screen here, but on this occasion I need to show you this. Just notice I have removed the "Bible" logo from the bottom of the screen, though!). That was in the context of liberation of the Jewish nation after the appalling desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, 200 years earlier, under a different occupation.

Now Maccabeus and his followers, the Lord leading them on, recovered the temple and the city; ...

... carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place.

(2 Maccabees 10:1,7)

So these crowds excitedly welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, I suspect, are not just thinking in terms of spiritual liberation, but *national*. Even after Jesus' resurrection, his closest followers still had that kind of agenda firmly lodged within their thinking. *Surely* Jesus is going to get rid of the Romans, eventually?

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

(Acts 1:6)

So, folks, *who is this Jesus?* National liberator, or spiritual saviour? Do you think in terms of the Gospel hitting home in this nation so that Great Britain will be made great again? Or do you see the Good News as, underneath it all, a means for driving a social revolution in a land, so that there will be more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, and a fair day's pay for a fair day's work? Never mind national, do you see Jesus as a *social* liberator, or a spiritual saviour? Which is more important in your thinking? Jobs for all, or *life* for all?

Back to Matthew, and the crowd continues to grow in excitement. Now they start picking up the words of one of the psalms, clearly understood in terms of *this is what it will be like when Messiah comes*.

And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

(Matthew 21:9)

Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.

(Psalms 118:25-26)

A verse from earlier on in that psalm is going to come into focus as the week unfolds - it is quoted by Matthew later on in this chapter:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

(Psalms 118:22)

Those chief priests will *reject* the Saviour whom God is sending. But the crowd right now are just going wild, and all over the city nobody can possibly avoid realising that something unusual is happening.

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?"

(Matthew 21:10)

That word *stirred* is the one from which we get our English words like *seismic*, something relating to an earthquake. But notice the question that Matthew says this all boils down to. Not just "*what* is happening?" but "*who* is this?" Because *who* this is determines *what* is actually happening.

We've had some suggestions already. The owner of the donkeys, who would recognise the words "the Lord". Jesus is *Lord*. That's a good answer.

There are the words of Zechariah, that Matthew has pointed us to: "your king". Jesus is *King*. That's a good answer, too. But it's not the last one we come to here.

And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

(Matthew 21:11)

So is this who he is? Jesus the prophet? Actually, that could be taken in two ways, as well. It could be that Jesus, the crowds are saying, is a prophet. That would be a worthy estimation of him, someone who comes speaking God's own truth. He is at least that. But is he *more* than that? Is he not just a prophet, but *the* prophet, the one that Moses predicted centuries back?

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers — it is to him you shall listen —"

(Deuteronomy 18:15)

Is Jesus that *special* prophet, that you'd write with a capital P? That's an even better answer. Or have the crowd put their own spin on this, too, with "the" slyly being taken to mean *our*?

Just remember the situation. Passover is approaching, just a week away. There will be Jews from all over converging on Jerusalem, including some from up north, Galilee. Even if Jesus hasn't lived in Nazareth for years, there will maybe be some who remember his early days there. And look, here is this Jesus: local boy making good in the big city of Jerusalem!

Think how it is when someone from Cornwall succeeds on some national stage. International rugby player ... ah, but he used to play for Redruth or Penzance! That's *our* boy who is now *the* international. And, maybe Matthew is hinting, there are some people in the crowd excited because they can lay claim to *our* boy *the prophet*. Galilee and Nazareth can finally be put firmly in place on the national map of importance and significance and prestige, maybe even standing alongside Jerusalem?

Is that who *you* regard Jesus as, the kind of saviour that your particular interest group can claim as its own? Jesus the working man. Jesus the refugee. Jesus the Jew. Jesus the one who dared to touch the leper, Jesus the one who spoke kindly to the woman taken in adultery. Jesus the one whom we consider represents *our* cause ... and in whose glory we feel we can bask simply by association.

So I went to school with **Professor Sir John Curtice**, the esteemed political academic regularly trotted out by the BBC for comment during election season. I went to university with **Nick Terrett**, head of the Pfizer team that discovered Viagra. As if being in the same room with them 40 or more years ago somehow ennoble me.

And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

(Matthew 21:11)

So is Jesus, for some of this crowd, simply the one who makes them feel somehow, vaguely, better about themselves? Folks, is that what you think Jesus dying for our guilt means? Simply that somehow it means you're to feel better about yourself, even if nothing inside has really been changed or affected at all?

So is he *The Prophet*, capital T and P, or is he the prophet from *Nazareth*, in italics, your local and therefore somehow conveniently *tame* prophet?

Folks, here is that question one final time, those words that shook the city of Jerusalem

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?"

(Matthew 21:10)

The answer to that question will shake the city a week later, too, when Jesus has cried from the cross that "it is finished":

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

(Matthew 27:50-51)

That's in confirmation of what Matthew told us, right back at the beginning of his account. "This is the prophet Jesus" ... the *prophesied* Jesus, too:

"... you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

(Matthew 1:21)

So who is he? The Lord, whose voice you are ready to obey?

"If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

(Matthew 21:3)

Your King?

"Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

(Matthew 21:5)

Coming to bring *his* salvation, *his* way, in that lowly pomp, riding on to die.

Or is he the Son of David, the even greater eventual son of the great Jewish king David? The culmination of all those hopes and promises, the fulfilment and the fulfiller of *everything* - just as he had claimed:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

(Matthew 5:17)

So do you agree with those crowds? Will you join in with their worship?

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

(Matthew 21:9)

Or is he the prophet? The capital-P Prophet, whose words we absolutely must hear and take to heart:

"This is the prophet Jesus, ..."

(Matthew 21:11)

Or is he just someone you will claim some passing connection to, even some affection for, but only so that you can bask, at a safe distance, in reflected glory?

"This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

(Matthew 21:11)

Which of these is this Jesus to you? Worst of all would be that you recognise him as did the chief priests, speaking undeniable truth, working irrefutable miracles, the Son of David, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Prophet greater than Moses, all of that, and then say “Yes, he is all of those ... but not to me”.

It was only recently that Jesus had spoken, in those most cutting last few of his parables, of a group of people who will say,

“We do not want this man to reign over us.”

(Luke 19:14)

He is the Prophet, but we do not want to hear him.

He is our King, but we suddenly have no king but Caesar.

He is Lord, but I will not bow to him.

We could do worse than to end with the words of a Christmas carol. Who is this Jesus?

*The King of kings salvation brings
Let loving hearts enthrone him*

The prophet, or your king?