

The Unexpected King and the Unready City

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Matthew 21:1-16

¹ Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘**The Lord needs them,**’ and he will send them at once.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵ “*Say to the daughter of Zion,* [Isa 62:11]

Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
***on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.*”** [Zech 9:9]

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ The huge crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

⁹ 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! [Psa 118:25-26]
Hosanna in the highest!”

¹⁰ And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken, saying, “Who is this?” ¹¹ And the crowds said, “This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

¹² And Jesus entered the temple and **drove out** all who sold and bought in the temple, and he **overturned** the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³ He said to them, “It is written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ [Isa 56:7]
but you make it ‘*a den of robbers.*’” [Jer 7:11]

¹⁴ And the **blind and the lame** came to him in the temple, and **he healed them.**

¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” they were indignant,

¹⁶ and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?”

And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared/restored praise?’” [Psa 8:2]

Matthew 27:37-43

³⁷ And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “*This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*” ³⁸ Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “*You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.*”

⁴¹ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ⁴² “*He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.*” ⁴³ *He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”*

Walking into the Center of the Human Story

What a strange and remarkable story this is! Jerusalem at Passover: a city of 30,000 with 120,000 visitors engulfing it. A crowd of pilgrims around a prophet from Galilee mingles with the religiously/politically hopeful throngs singing Passover songs of deliverance. Things start to happen. They recognize a prophetic sign. Has a longed-for moment finally come? What's happening?

The story may be hard for us to resonate with at a distance of 2000 years. But with effort we can understand a lot of it. It is the beginning of what the Bible shows us is the center, the turning point of human history. Not just an important event, but the consummate event. In Jesus of Nazareth, the God/creator of the universe, reveals his heart among his creatures. He brings his long history with Israel to an astonishing climax and opens the story to Israel and all the world. He takes our deepest problems of suffering, injustice, sin, alienation, death, ... into himself on the cross. He creates new, unconquerable life for us out of death as Jesus is raised to new life. All of it new, old, unexpected!

Many play roles good and bad in this narrative. But God/Jesus/Holy Spirit is the principal actor. This is God's doing. It continues to be God's work even today.

What's Going On Here? Long Hope and Crisis Future

Matthew's narrative shows us lots of scripture references. Mt. is rooting this event deeply in Israel's hopes and expectations. Notice that this event is prearranged by Jesus (donkeys are ready). Jesus is actively teaching by his actions, starting the flow of events, shaping them. He knows many misunderstand God's purpose.

Many disciples have heard him, watched him heal and serve. They know he's the Messiah. But in fact they are defining Jesus by their understanding of Messiah. He wants to change them to redefine "Messiah" by what they see in him. A hard change. Yes, he's Messiah, Son of David, and this is what God's Messiah is like, anointed by God not humans. So also redefine God as seen in the face of Jesus.

We watch the kingship dialog of Jesus and the crowds unfold: Riding donkeys: humble, glorious king of peace (Zech 9). Response: Cloaks on the road (2Kg 9:13). Songs of Ascent (Ps 118) amplified: Hosanna (*Deliver us we pray*), Son of David. God's true representative. The city is shaken. This is the prophet (Dt 18:15), Jesus from Galilee. In the Temple, havoc not reform; the Lord coming to his temple (Mal 3:1-2), judgment on the present regime (Isa, Jer), impending crisis. Blind and lame healed: signs of Messiah (Mt 11:5). Children praising; priests and scribes indignant (Ps 8): Babies with new vision able to see a new reality (Mt 11:25; 18:3). Disciples, crowds, city, blind, children, priests: all see, but is it Jesus?

Only Jesus knows the unfolding meaning of Messiah/king. He embodies Israel and humanity. He pours out God's love for all his rebellious creatures. On the cross God's self-giving love (true power) confronts human power (true weakness)....

New York City and Old Jerusalem – Challenging Every Culture

He could have been riding into NYC or into thousands of churches across the centuries. Most of the churches' great crimes in history (persecutions, crusades, inquisitions) come from using coercive violence, not self-giving love.

Personally, we struggle to believe that God can be so gracious and so transforming. This humble king shows God's true glorious power to heal brokenness and bring new life from death. He wants us with the eyes of babies to see his new world.