

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 04/02/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Palm Sunday**

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>

**Matthew 21:1-11**

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### Who is this Jesus?

The Gospel lectionary for Palm Sunday in Year A is naturally Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion - often referred to as the Triumphal Entry. The procession of Jesus and His followers recalls images of Jesus riding on a donkey with palms covering the road (even though only John specifically references palms) as jubilant crowds proclaim Him as the Messiah. Matthew's account notes how the whole city of Jerusalem was "*stirred up*," or more literally, "*shaken*," and the crowds ask, "*who is this?*" Today, the inherited church continues to shrink at an even faster rate after the Pandemic. Between the "Dones" and the "Nones", there are many people in our post-Christian society who are left asking: *Who is this Jesus?*

### Matthew 21:1-11 Commentary

Earlier in Matthew we read how the Pharisees conspired against Jesus and He withdrew, ordering the crowds not to make Him known (12:14-16). From this point there has been a progressive revealing of Jesus' identity. A major pivot occurs after Peter confesses Jesus as *the Christ, the Son of the Living God* (16:16f). Jesus predicts His death and resurrection three times (16:21-23; 17:12; 20:17-19), his glory is revealed during the Transfiguration, and immediately before the lectionary text two blind men confess Jesus as both "*Lord*" and "*Son of David*" (20:30-31). Jesus is thus now openly proclaimed as the Messiah.

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

Along with Jesus and His disciples there would have been other pilgrims also traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. Bethphage was like a suburb of Jerusalem but separated by the steep Kidron Valley. The route over the Mount of Olives was the typical route for those approaching from the East. How did Jesus know where to find the donkey and the colt? Matthew records no other visit of Jesus to Jerusalem during His adult ministry but there are hints He may have been there previously (see Matthew 26:55). The Gospel of John does record that Jesus was present in Jerusalem on four other occasions: two during a Passover (John 2.13; 12.12), one during an unnamed festival (John 5.1) and one at the Feast of Dedication (now Hannukah) (John 10.22). Verses 2-3 may be an example of divine foreknowledge or an example of Jesus' meticulous planning - a critical necessity in ministry today.

<sup>4</sup> *This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,* <sup>5</sup> *“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 emphasized to his Jewish audience how Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies throughout his entire Gospel. In this instance, v.5 is mostly a reference to the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 with the first clause from Isaiah 62:11. By such an entrance, Jesus openly declares He is the Davidic Messiah.

<sup>6</sup> *The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them.* <sup>7</sup> *They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.* <sup>8</sup> *Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.* <sup>9</sup> *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!”*

In Mark's Gospel the colt is described as being unbroken and thus not been ridden before (11:1-3). Some commentators on Matthew suggest Jesus rode on the colt and its mother was tethered alongside which would have steadied the colt in the noise of the procession. It is highly unlikely Jesus rode both at the same time. The shouts of Jesus' followers were not out of place for the upcoming festival. "*Hosanna*" comes from the Hebrew word that means "Save us." By Jesus' time, it was commonly used in worship as a word of praise. "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" is a reference to Psalm 118:26, a song of praise traditionally sung at Passover. There is no doubt that this scene in total would have aroused popular ideas of Messianic kingship.

<sup>10</sup> *And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?”* <sup>11</sup> *And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”*

The crowds making all the noise and laying down the cloaks and branches on the road were the crowds travelling with Jesus - very much outsiders. The "in crowd" in Jerusalem does not know what to make of this. We read how the whole city was stirred up. The Greek word *eseisthe*, rendered here as "*stirred up*," is where the English words seismic and seismology originate. Matthew uses the same word in 27:51 "*the earth shook*" and in 28:2 "*a great earthquake*." Whether due to apprehension or enthusiasm, or some of both, the people in Jerusalem were clearly shaken by this dramatic entrance and the Messianic fervor it provoked. This has echoes of early in Matthew's Gospel when the Magi come looking for the King of the Jews and "*all Jerusalem was troubled*" (2:3). We read here how the whole city (hyperbole) asked, *Who is this?* Matthew deals with this question from the opening of the Gospel where he presents the genealogy of Christ. Note how it was the crowds traveling with Jesus who responded. "*The prophet*" referenced here would have been understood in relation to Deuteronomy 18:15-22 and thus has eschatological significance.

### Reflections

On Palm Sunday Jesus and His disciples enter the city of Jerusalem. This is like a contingent from Podunk, MS marching into Washington and proclaiming the new ruler! By the end of the week, however, the Messiah would be dead on a cross with even His closest followers scattered. The establishment does not react well to being displaced, even when it is God doing the displacing. This, praise God, is not the end of the story.

Crowds can be fickle. Many wanted Jesus on their own terms. When they were disappointed, they quickly turned. Things are no different today as God's Word, both in the flesh and written down, is perverted for personal agendas. Many see Jesus as a life coach, a co-pilot, a get-out-of-jail-free card, a social justice warrior, a way in which they can get their will done in heaven, a means to worldly prosperity, or as an absolute last ditched break glass in case of emergency. Others see Jesus as a way to force their values on others. After all, we all know Jesus

was American and used the King James Bible. As the expression of church in the West falters, there are many churches willing to package consumerist offerings that satisfy each of these needs. Yet we know Christ is the Head of His Church, not Peter Drucker! The Harvard Business Review is not a theological journal.

Today, there are many people seeking spiritual answers in non-traditional ways – i.e., outside of the church institution. Back on the original Palm Sunday when the people asked, *who is this*, it was Jesus' disciples who were willing to give an answer to the crowds. We are called to do the same in our time.

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." [Matthew 9:37-38]

### Application

- In the triumphal entry scene, who do you most relate to?
  - The disciples – marching into Jerusalem expecting the world to change to be the way you want it.
  - The Jerusalem crowd – troubled and wondering what is going on.
  - The established elites – hoping the riff raff will soon leave and thinks will return to normal.
  - The donkey – thinking the parade and spectacle is all for you!
  - The donkey – submitting to the will of Christ and enjoying the ride!
- For those whose tradition it is to receive a palm folded into the shape of a cross to take home and display it in their home, how has your faith journey progressed since you received last year's palm? What insights from this year's Lent do you plan to activate on this year?

