

## **The Triumphal Entry**

### **Matt 21:1-14**

Now, I know that under lock-down every day is in danger of becoming like every other day. But today is Palm Sunday - when traditionally Christians remember Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, up until now Jesus has been keen to keep his true identity under wraps, but now, as he rides into Jerusalem, it's as if the curtain's drawn back and, for a moment, we see something of who he really is.

But before we look at the passage read to us, I want to take you back to another book in the Bible, and another time in the history of God's people. Now, one great reason to read old books is that they remind us that human nature doesn't really change, and the stuff you're facing in life isn't so very different from what people have faced before.

And the book I want to take you to is the book of the prophet Zechariah, and the time is around 500BC. And Zechariah wrote this book at a time when God's people had returned to the land of Israel from exile in Babylon. And people thought they were entering a new dawn, a new age. A time of restoration and rebuilding. But things didn't exactly work out like that. And their lives didn't take the turn they wanted or hoped for. Sure, they'd been freed from captivity, but what they discovered was that they were still under other's control. And they were seemingly powerless in the face of decisions made by others. And, as a people, they were - to all intents and purposes - an insignificant bit-part player on the world stage. They were buffeted by world events and their future felt anything but certain. Plus, because of taxes and the impact of war on trade, financially things were bad.

Think about that: Lack of freedom; an uncertain future; worrying world events; a sense of powerlessness; financial hardship - those things are a potent cocktail for discouragement, aren't they? Then and now.

And yet, it was into that situation that God spoke through Zechariah. And listen to what he said: Zech 9:9-10: '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. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.'

In other words, God is saying, despite all you are currently experiencing you can rejoice, and not just rejoice, but rejoice greatly! Why? Because their king was coming.

And it was these words from Zechariah that Jesus deliberately acted out as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Matt 21:4, 'This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, '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.'

And Jesus did it so that those watching - then, and us now, can find joy, knowing the king has come.

So, we're going to look at the crowd, at the leaders, and then at the king.

### **The Crowd**

As Jesus climbs on the donkey and descends the Mount of Olives, look how the crowd respond: v8, ‘Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.’

Now, today, if some dignitary, or VIP, visits, we talk about giving them ‘the red carpet treatment’, don’t we - and you physically roll out a red carpet. It’s a way of saying, you’re important and we welcome you. And as this crowd of residents and pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover, throw their cloaks down, they’re giving him the red carpet treatment.

There was a famous moment in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the 1500’s, when the queen was in danger of walking into a muddy puddle. But just in the nick of time, Sir Walter Raleigh, the great explorer, whipped off his velvet cloak, and laid it over the puddle, so the royal feet could stay clean and dry. It was a sign of deference, of honour for his queen.

And here the people spread out their cloaks before their king. And in John’s gospel, John tells us that the branches they cut were palm branches. And that would have rung historical bells because it was palm branches the people of Jerusalem waved in the air when in 164BC Judas Maccabeus, the great Jewish rebel leader, entered Jerusalem to liberate the city from the power of the Seleucid empire.

And listen to what the crowd was saying, v9, ‘And the crowds that went before him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” And *hosanna* means, *Salvation!* It’s an expression of freedom and liberation. And ‘Son of David’ was the name they gave to the Messiah, the long promised descendent of David who would come and rescue them from their enemies. And they’re crying out, *Hosanna in the highest* - let praise, freedom and deliverance, fill the skies!

And if you didn’t know what comes next, you’d say this was absolutely Jesus’ triumphal entry, the king coming to his city, to be crowned, to reign. Except, in just a few days time a very similar crowd will be crying out ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ And Pilate, the Roman Governor of all people, will be left asking, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ In the words of that beautiful hymn, *My Song is Love Unknown*, ‘Sometimes they strew His way, And His sweet praises sing; Resounding all the day Hosannas to their King: Then “Crucify!” Is all their breath, And for His death They thirst and cry.’

Crowds are fickle, aren’t they? Crowds like nothing more than to put someone on a pedestal, and then knock them off again. The crowd loves to see a celebrity rise, but loves it even more when they fall.

So, as you watch this crowd, remember, membership of the crowd is not the same as true discipleship. When life is going well, when the sun’s shining and you’ve got a palm branch in your hand; when you’re surrounded by everyone else saying how wonderful Jesus, and life, is; when the future’s full of promise and your heart’s full of expectation; when there’s a party atmosphere; it can be easy to be a member of the crowd and to follow Jesus. But when the point of trial comes, that moment of costly decision, when everyone else is heading for the exit, or you’re under pressure, it can be very different.

You see, the good times don't *really* reveal what's *really* inside you, it's the bad times that have that power. Those times when you're under pressure or are being challenged like never before. Those times have this ability to take the lid off our hearts and characters and show us what we're really like.

But what the bad times won't do is form you - your character; at least not at the start. In time they will, but not at the start, they simply bring out what's already inside you. And the way you respond to the highs and lows of life, isn't down to the great crowd moments, it's down to how we've responded to and followed Jesus in the mundane, day-to-day; when there's no crowd watching; when we're on our own; in the secret place of our heart and our decision making; when every day seems like every other day. It's in days like we're experiencing now that characters can be formed. When we choose loyalty to Christ, and there's no crowd to see it.

But then look how the people of Jerusalem react: v10, 'And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying "Who is this?"' You know, that is probably *the* key question the gospels put before us, isn't it? Who is this man, Jesus? And look how the crowd responds: v11, 'And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."'

Now, what's wrong with that answer? And the answer is, nothing. Was Jesus a prophet? Yes. Was he from Nazareth of Galilee? Yes. None of that's wrong. It's just incomplete. And it's possible - and maybe this is true for you - that you can know true things about Jesus; and what you know can be absolutely right; it's just that your view of him is too limited. He's a prophet; he's someone whose life and teaching you admire; who's teaching you think you, and everyone else, should live up to, but he's not yet your king.

Well, before we look at the king, let's look at a second group standing a bit further back.

### **The Leaders**

Now, in Matthew's account the Chief Priests complain about the crowds praising Jesus when he gets to the Temple. But Luke tells us those complaints started even earlier, as Jesus approached Jerusalem: Luke 19:39, 'And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples."'

Now, you are always going to face pressure to keep quiet about Jesus. Like here, that may come from religious people, who dislike the idea of the exclusivity of Christ, that he's king, and salvation is found in him and him alone. It may come from those in positions of influence in your life, like your parents, or supervisor, or a friend in your friendship group. And if you care too much what they think of you, you'll find yourself staying quiet about Jesus.

But given the situation we're living in at the moment, I reckon the thing with perhaps the most power to silence you, at the moment, is fear and anxiety. You read the news and you become worried for yourself and your loved ones. And the noise of that fear begins to crowd out the voice telling you to trust God, that your loving father has you in his hands. And your heart of trust and faith and praise falls silent.

You see, when fear or anxiety stalks up on you, you need something greater, something with more authority, with more power over your life, if fear, and the thing you fear, is not to silence you.

And listen to how Jesus responds: Luke 19:40, "I tell you, if these [crowds] were silent, the very stones would cry out." Because creation - from inanimate rocks, to you and me, was made to worship. You were made to speak out who Jesus is and what he's done for you. So you'll only ever be truly you, living in the groove of who you were made to be; you'll only ever be whole and at peace, when you know, and your heart is telling you - he's the king. He's the one with the power and authority over my life.

So, let's take a look at the king.

### **The King**

Now whether it's in real history or in literature, there's something spine-tingling about a leader liberating his people, isn't there? Think of de Gaulle entering Paris in 1944, or Aragorn coming to Minas Tirith in the Lord of the Rings.

So don't miss the significance of Jerusalem in the Jewish psyche. You see, as Jesus approaches the city, he's coming to the place the psalmist calls 'the city of the great King' (Ps 48:2) - the place of David's throne, yes, but even more so - the place of God's throne, the temple, that stood over the city.

And as Christ approaches, he deliberately fulfils those words from Zechariah 9. He rides in on a donkey, so that all those watching, steeped in the words of the prophets, knew he was coming to claim that throne. That this city was his city.

But think of the scale of what he's claiming. Zechariah 9:10, 'His rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.' So he's not just coming as king of Israel. This is not just some little local puppet ruler of some mightier empire in far off Rome. He's coming as the one claiming dominion over every nation and every empire. The king before whom all kings must bow.

It's why he throws out all the money changers and traders in the temple. You see, where had they set up stall? In the Court of the Gentiles, the one place the nations could come and pray. It's why Matthew tells us in v14 that 'the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them.' Because they were forbidden to enter the temple. But now, their king has come, and the marginalised and the excluded are welcomed, to come find their place and health in his kingdom.

The Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper, said, 'there is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'' And it's here, in this triumphal entry, that Christ is laying claim to every nation and every life. From sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth. And saying, it's Mine.

And that includes you. This entry is a call to all of us to give him our allegiance.

And yet, this is not the military triumph of some emperor who has mercilessly crushed his enemies is it? In AD 83, on the eve of battle with the Romans, the Scottish chieftain Calgacus said of the Romans, 'Robbery, butchery and rapine they call government; they create a desert and call it peace.' And *pax romana* was an imposed peace, a peace under threat of dire consequences.

But that's not the way of Christ the king, is it? Look at Zech 9:10: 'I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak

peace to the nations.’ And later on, Zechariah says that under this king, ‘living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem’ to all the nations (14:8). Roman peace, the *pax romana*, created a desert. Jesus makes the desert a flowering garden.

And he’s the One who can bring peace to your heart, because he’s greater than your fear and *what* you fear. Look at Zech 9:9 again: ‘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.’

Jesus is the opposite of the proud, or vain world leader, ruling for his own prestige. This is the king born in a stable, not a palace. The one who came to serve, not be served. Who comes on a beast of burden, not a war horse. And it’s his humility that can bring peace, not just to nations, but to your heart. You see, listen to what he says in Matt 11:28-29: ‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am humble and gentle in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’

In his commentary on Jesus’ entry here, JC Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool, talks about the fact that Jesus knew where his disciples could find the donkey and its colt. And then Ryle says, ‘The thought of Christ’s perfect knowledge should comfort all true-hearted Christians... The Master’s eye is always on them. He knows where they live and their daily trials... Let them take courage.’

In other words, if Jesus knew where to find the donkey, he knows about you. He knows the details of your home life. He knows the stresses and strains you’re facing because of lockdown, as well as the joys. He knows your burdens and your fears. And your king says to you, I am humble and gentle, come to me and find rest for your souls.

Find the rest that comes with knowing he knows. Find the rest that comes from knowing he is in sovereign control of it all. The king over every power. The king greater than what you fear.

But also, find the rest that comes from knowing you don’t have to impress him. You see, later on Zechariah tells us that this great king, the shepherd of the Lord’s sheep, will be struck down, not by his enemies, but by God himself. Zech 13:7, “‘Awake, O sword against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,” declares the Lord of hosts.’ Why? Because, as Zechariah says, “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

You see, is this Jesus’ triumphal entry? Yes... but. His ultimate triumph comes in a few days time when this king humbles himself to the point of death, and gives his life for his people, for you and me, and then God raises him from the dead. That’s the triumph.

And you and I can live, today, in the days ahead, in the good of that triumph. He’s the king who gave his life for you. He won’t let you go now. You don’t have to impress him by your great faith in the face of danger. You just have to trust him and as you do, you’ll find peace. And, looking to him, you can take courage and love and serve your neighbour. So, Westlake, rejoice greatly, your king has come.