

SERMON NOTES

Palm Sunday

Synaxis Gospel

Matthew 20:29-21:17

THE COMING OF THE KING

INTRODUCTION

In our reading, Matthew recorded the great entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as He announced, with all the symbolism of the prophesied Messiah, that He is the Christ of God. We remember this event as Palm Sunday. However, before describing the preparations for the entry, Matthew has seen fit to include an event that is pertinent to the public recognition of Jesus as the true Messiah, the promised King (the Christ) of the Jews.

The Jews—the remnant of the people God had originally chosen to serve in His purpose to save mankind—had been under discipline for hundreds of years for their disobedience and unfaithfulness. They had suffered tremendously first as exiles and then from foreign oppression in their own land. Although their prophets had foretold this discipline for their sins, they had also been given an encouraging word from the LORD: someday the punishment would end,¹ and God would bring about a new age of peace and well being not only for the Jews, but for the entire world, including the animal kingdom.² This wonderful age will be ruled over by a king of the Jews,³ but according to the prophet Daniel, He will be a divine king.⁴

The prophets had foretold many things concerning the future king. He would be born in Bethlehem,⁵ a descendent of the great King David.⁶ He would be born of a virgin mother.⁷ He would live in Galilee.⁸ He would be called out of Egypt.⁹ He would perform miracles of healing.¹⁰ He would be rejected and killed like a criminal for the salvation of

¹ Isaiah 40:1-11.

² Isaiah 11:1-13.

³ See above notes from Isaiah. The Christ would be from “the root of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of King David.

⁴ Daniel 7:13-14 and Micah 5:2 as well as Isaiah 9:6.

⁵ Micah 5:2.

⁶ All references to this prophecy are based on God’s promise to establish his kingdom forever found in 2 Samuel 7:12-16. See also note 3 above.

⁷ Isaiah 7:14.

⁸ Isaiah 9:1-2.

⁹ Hosea 11:1. This occurred after Mary and Joseph took Him to Egypt because of the slaughter of the infants after His birth in Bethlehem.

¹⁰ Isaiah 35:3-6.

His people.¹¹ He would be buried in a rich man's tomb.¹² His body would not undergo decay,¹³ and He would live to see the results of His suffering and be greatly exalted as the great Servant of the LORD.¹⁴ Moreover, He will be the great and awesome judge of all mankind.¹⁵

At the time of our reading, the facts of Jesus' birth were not public knowledge, and His death and resurrection had not yet occurred. In fact, the self-sacrifice of the king was not a part of the prophecy that the people understood and expected. They were expecting the all powerful, eternal king—that he would ever be killed seemed to be a contradiction of terms.¹⁶

Miracles of healing were expected of the coming king, especially the cure of lameness and blindness. This miraculous ability was an identifying proof of His person. Therefore Matthew records that Jesus, albeit out of compassion, performed this identifying miracle just prior to His entry into Jerusalem as the promised king.

SYNTAXIS READING

Matthew 20:29-21:17

And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"

The multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, "What do you want me to do for you?"

They said to Him, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened." And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them."

¹¹ Isaiah 53.

¹² Isaiah 53:9.

¹³ Psalm 16:10.

¹⁴ Isaiah 53:10-12.

¹⁵ Micah 4: 1-3. See also in the New Testament, John 5:22 and 1 Corinthians 5:10.

¹⁶ John 12:34. 'Lifted up' in the context meant 'be crucified.'

Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying,

“SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.’ “

And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat. And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. And the multitudes going ahead of Him and those who followed after, were crying out, saying,

“Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!”

And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the multitudes were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.

And He said to them, “It is written, ‘MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER’; but you are making it a ROBBERS’ DEN.”

And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were crying out in the temple, and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant, and 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 BABES THOU HAST PREPARED PRAISE FOR THYSELF’?” And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.

NOTES

And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”

Jericho, in New Testament days was about 16 miles North-east of Jerusalem. Jericho means ‘the city of palms.’

In the parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark only one blind man is mentioned and he is named Bartimaeus.

‘Lord’ is not always as clear in Greek as it is in Hebrew. In Hebrew, the word translated LORD can be clearly seen to be the personal Name of God. Another word is used when it means ‘master.’ But in Greek, the same word is used for both meanings. So we cannot be sure what the blind men were calling Jesus when they cried out “Lord.”

Calling Him “Son of David” is recognition that Jesus is the prophesied king who will heal the blind. Matthew uses the term ten times in his Gospel, four of those are in our reading. The kingship of Jesus is a major theme for Matthew.

The multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

The persistence of the blind men despite the opposition of the crowd is underscored.

Jesus wanted them to verbalize their request. (Even though He already knows what we need.)

They said to Him, “Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.” And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

The request was for healing of their physical blindness, for they were not spiritually blind—they recognized Jesus as their promised king. Jesus’ heart went out to them and He healed them.

Matthew records another miracle of healing the blind early in Jesus’ ministry.¹⁷ There, the healed are told to keep quiet about the miracles. Here, no such command is given, because the time has arrived for His announcement of His identity as the king.

The ability to heal the blind was a mark of the Messiah. The crowd would recognize this.

And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says

¹⁷ Matthew 9:27-31.

something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.”

Bethphage’s¹⁸ exact location is not known, but it is probably just outside the walls of Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is only a short walk over the Kidron valley to Jerusalem.

Why Matthew has a mistaken reading of the number of animals prescribed by the prophet is unknown at this time. Jesus would ride only on the colt. Perhaps the mother of the colt was allowed to follow her offspring.¹⁹ That the unbroken colt allowed itself to be ridden is another sign of Jesus’ command over all nature.

Jesus is completely in control of the events. He will symbolically announce that He is the king they expect by deliberately fulfilling prophecy.

Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “**SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, ‘BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.’”**

This prophecy is from Zechariah 9:9. “SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION” is probably a conflation with Isaiah 62:11.

The “daughter” is the people of the city. ‘Zion’ is a poetic title for Jerusalem. The easternmost of the two hills of Jerusalem has the name Zion and was the location of the fortress.

In Hebrew parallelism, the *colt* would be the same animal as the *donkey* of the preceding phrase. This is not the royal mule; it is the humble mount of all classes of people. This is not the mount of a conqueror, but of One Who comes in peace.

By Jesus’ day, the prophecy from Zechariah had long been held by the rabbis to be a prophecy of the Messiah, so Jesus’ action would be taken as a claim that He, indeed, is the Christ.²⁰

The rabbis also expected the Messiah to be someone like Moses. Moses was described as the meekest of men. The word translated here as ‘gentle’ in the Greek, is actually ‘meek’ in the Hebrew of the quotation. A meek person is one who doesn’t take an attitude of pushy superiority, but instead displays a quiet and gentle self-assurance no matter what his social status may be.

And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat. And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were

¹⁸ The town’s name may mean ‘house of figs.’

¹⁹ One might suspect an early copyist’s ‘correction’ of the Matthew text. Such a one would not have understood the parallelism of Hebrew poetry. However there is no proof of such corruption at this time. Mark and Luke have the single animal in their accounts. Compare Mark 11:1-10 and Luke 19:29-38.

²⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, vol. III* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) p. 116

cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. And the multitudes going ahead of Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying,

They made a saddle blanket of their coats. But the people recognized that Jesus was claiming to be King and so, as in 2 Kings 9:13 upon the proclamation of a new king, they strewed his way with their garments.

“Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!”

The word *hosanna* is an Aramaic expression meaning *Save, I pray!* “The Son of David” is in the Greek dative and could also be translated ‘by the Son of David.’ In other words, the prayer is to God to save by the hand of the Son of David. The second *Hosanna* could be translated (again the expression is in the dative with a preposition that could be translated ‘by’) as “Save I pray by (the hand of, or power of) the Most High. *Most High* is a title for God. We know that Jesus is the Most High incarnated.

And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the multitudes were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

The reaction of the crowd (accompanying Jesus) to Jesus’ entry as the promised king was to recognize Him as such. They had every reason to accept His act for they had seen His identifying miracles. But the crowd **in** the capital did not react in the same way.

It is interesting that the crowd did not answer the city’s question with, “This is Jesus, the Son of David.” Their answer was **not** one that would identify Him as the King, unless they understood Him to be *the* Prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18. This was a prophecy that the Christ would be like Moses.

And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.

The way Matthew presents his material gives one the impression that immediately upon entering Jerusalem, Jesus cleansed the temple; but Mark records that He went to the temple, looked around, and it was on the next day that He returned and cleared the temple court of merchants. Chronology is not so important to the Gospel writers.

The king was responsible for the state of the Temple.²¹

This temple court was no doubt the court of the Gentiles (the sons of the stranger), the large outermost of the courts surrounding the temple itself. Gentiles could go no farther than this court to worship. This worship space was being taken up as a marketplace.

The temple had its own sacred money to be used for temple dues; Roman money, which the economy used and which had pagan engravings, had to be exchanged for the temple coins in order to pay their dues.

²¹ Compare 2 Kings 23:4

And He said to them, “It is written, ‘MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER’; but you are making it a ROBBERS’ DEN.”

This quotation is from Isaiah 56:6-7

*ALSO THE SONS OF THE STRANGER, THAT JOIN
THEMSELVES TO THE LORD, TO SERVE HIM, AND TO LOVE
THE NAME OF THE LORD, TO BE HIS SERVANTS, EVERY
ONE THAT KEEPETH THE SABBATH FROM POLLUTING IT,
AND TAKETH HOLD OF MY COVENANT;*

*EVEN THEM WILL I BRING TO MY HOLY MOUNTAIN, AND
MAKE THEM JOYFUL IN MY HOUSE OF PRAYER: THEIR
BURNT OFFERINGS AND THEIR SACRIFICES SHALL BE
ACCEPTED UPON MINE ALTAR; FOR MINE HOUSE SHALL
BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE.*

And from Jeremiah 7:11

*IS THIS HOUSE, WHICH IS CALLED BY MY NAME, BECOME
A DEN OF ROBBERS IN YOUR EYES? BEHOLD, EVEN I
HAVE SEEN IT, SAITH THE LORD.*

And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant, and said to Him, “Do you hear what these are saying?”

The chief priests were the High Priest, former high priests, and members of their families. Normally a high priest would hold office until his death, but under the Roman domination, the high priests were appointed by the king (appointed by the Roman emperor) or Roman governor. Thus, the office changed hands often.

The city of Jerusalem under the leadership of the chief priests and the scribes did not accept the testimony of the miraculous identifying works of the promised Messiah— healing the blind and the lame.

The children, presumably untaught, recognized what their elders and leaders were too spiritually blind to see.

And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABES THOU HAST PREPARED PRAISE FOR THYSELF’?”

This quotation is from Psalm 8:2 with influence from Exodus 15:2 (which the rabbis understood was the occasion referred to by the psalm and were in the habit of conflating with Psalm 8:2)²²

Jesus not only points to God as the source of the children’s praise, thus making it legitimate, but also that the praise for Jesus *is* praise for God.

And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.

²² See Davies and Allison p. 142 for a discussion of “the belief that at the Red Sea children praised God.”

Thus ends the confrontation with the leaders who are left without an answer. From now on, Jesus will teach only the disciples.

Bethany was the home of Jesus' friends—Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus (whom He raised from the dead).²³

APPLICATION

Our Lord once told a parable about the different kinds of reception He and His Word are given. There are some people who hear His word and truly accept Him and the salvation He offers. There are others who accept Him for the moment and then are distracted or cannot take the persecution that often follows. These soon fall away. There are others who never receive Him at all. In our reading for today, all of these types were present as Jesus entered Jerusalem on the day we have come to know as Palm Sunday.

It was a day for pilgrims to go up to the Holy City of Jerusalem. It was time for Passover, the great feast in memory of the miraculous salvation the Lord had wrought in bringing the Israelites out of their Egyptian slavery. Because the Law required that all who could, must go up to Jerusalem for the yearly celebration, people packed the road over the Mount of Olives. The city could not accommodate all of the crowds, so thousands camped outside the walls.

In a matter of days the Passover lambs would be slain in the Temple. On the night of the original Passover, the blood of a lamb smeared on the doors of the Israelite homes had saved them from the death angel who 'passed over' *them* but killed the first-born of all other homes in Egypt, from the Pharaoh's to the poorest worker's family. In Jesus' day the lambs were sacrificed as symbols of the blood of the slain lamb that had saved the Hebrew people 1400 years earlier. The roasted lambs became the center of the evening meal for the joyful celebrants.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, He knew that on the day the lambs were slain, He too would die as the Sacrifice that saves from eternal death. His atoning blood would protect all who chose to accept it. The King was coming to die for the life of His people. He was coming to be the substitute for all mankind, to pay the sin penalty that every human deserves to pay—the penalty of death, eternal separation from God.

The prophets had foretold the King Who would save His people. He would be a descendent of the great King David. He would perform wondrous miracles, healing the lame and the blind. He would come to the Holy City, His capital, presenting Himself to it in peace, riding in gentle meekness on a donkey.

The pilgrim crowd was already abuzz with the latest of Jesus miracles. As well as casting out demons, healing all sorts of diseases (including leprosy), He had opened the eyes of a blind man in Jericho, and most recently, raised a man in Bethany who had been dead for four days. What more evidence did they need that this man was the promised king?

²³ See John 11.

Finally, Jesus mounted a donkey and joined the pilgrims going up the road to Jerusalem. This was His public acknowledgment that He was indeed their King. The crowd went wild, throwing their cloaks in His path, cutting palm branches to strew along His way, and shouting out prayers to God for the promised salvation this Man would bring.

But in Jerusalem, the religious leaders, led by the High Priest, were madly indignant. They did not accept this man. In fact, they hated Him, and had been planning for some time to rid themselves of Him. But they were in a dilemma as to how they might accomplish this without upsetting the pilgrims, who considered Jesus a prophet. The hatred of the religious leaders was only increased shortly after Jesus' triumphal entry. With kingly authority, He drove out the Temple merchants in the court of the Gentiles, and then proceeded to continue healing the lame and the blind in the Temple courts. The joyful shouts of the little children acclaiming Him as their King were unbearable, and the chief priests tried to put a stop to it by reproaching Jesus Himself. All was to no avail. Scripture after Scripture was thrown up to them. This was the worst cut of all, for they had no answer.

Thus, we have those who accepted Jesus, and those who rejected Him. Some who had momentarily accepted Him would not be able to face the persecution they knew would follow, if they persisted in claiming Jesus as their Savior. For others, it was a passing fancy; they had been caught up for a while in the excitement, but other matters would soon make it unimportant. They might even decide that the priests and other leaders were probably right, and Jesus was a charlatan that should be punished for deceiving the people.

The Gospels tell us how that week ended. Jesus and His disciples ate one last meal together on Holy Thursday. Jesus took that opportunity, knowing that He would die the next day, to teach them a great lesson in the kind of servant He is, and the kind of servant they must become. He washed their filthy feet, an unheard of act by a master for disciples. He then explained that henceforth, whenever they ate the broken Bread and drank the poured out Wine as He commanded, they must acknowledge His shed blood and His broken body that He was about to sacrifice for their sakes.

It is amazing to us, 2000 years later, that the disciples understood so little of Jesus' teaching at that time. One of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, left the supper to betray Him to His enemies. The rest went with Jesus to the Mount of Olives, where He wanted to pray before the ordeal that awaited Him. They fled when Jesus submitted to arrest in the early hours of Friday morning. Only John and Peter witnessed the trials before the Sanhedrin and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Out of fear for his life, Peter denied him three times. Only John supported Jesus' mother as they, along with the women who had followed Him during His ministry, watched in horror as He was crucified.

Two secret disciples—they had to be secret because they were members of the ruling body of the Jews—Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, dared to claim His body and bury it. They, thus, lost everything—including their position and their prestige—because the Sanhedrin excommunicated from the life of the nation anyone who acknowledged

Jesus. Deep despair engulfed all those who had loved, and hoped in, Jesus of Nazareth as their Savior and King.

One of the very special aspects of the Armenian Church is that, with our traditions, we are mentally transported back 2000 years to relive the life of those who followed our Lord. It is as if we are actually there. We are joyful on Palm Sunday, waving our palm branches in welcome and proclamation of our King; we are present at the Last Supper, and representatives of our local churches experience their feet being washed. We are full of despair as we decorate the tomb of our crucified Lord. Saturday evening is a time of reflection and prayer. But then, Sunday morning finally comes, and we rejoice.

As we relive the last week of our Lord's life, seeing once again His crucifixion and burial, may we gratefully remember that it was all for us. Because of His great love, the Almighty gave His incarnate life for us! May none of us be found in the ranks of the deniers, or the doubters, or the momentary believers. May we all be found as true and faithful followers of our magnificent Savior. He deserves nothing less, He deserves everything we are and have. He deserves our life.