

Palm Sunday: Welcome the King!

Matthew 21:1–17

Lisa Scheffler, author

Over 200 years ago in America, we overthrew the reign of a monarch and transferred the right to govern to those elected by the people, from the people. It was a radical idea at the time, but one necessitated by the founders' experience and knowledge of history. When power is concentrated in the hands of the few or the one, the risk of tyranny is high. Why? People with power are easily corruptible.

But what if there was a king who was impervious to corruption? One who was good, wise and powerful? One that was incapable of selfishness or deceit and would never abuse power or exploit the weak? One that loved people, served them and who's utmost desire was to see his people flourish?

Jesus is that king!

Easter is coming, and we're preparing our hearts to celebrate the Savior who would give his life to rescue humanity from sin and death. But before he sacrificed himself on the cross, Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king. This Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day churches throughout the centuries have celebrated Jesus' triumphal entry and the start of Holy Week. We'll look carefully at Matthew's account of these events and consider the ways Jesus presents himself as the prophesied Messiah and King.

Day 1

When Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time, his life and ministry are coming to a climax. Jesus had created quite a stir in the outer provinces of Judea. He taught with undeniable authority, openly challenged the religious leaders, healed the sick, and even raised the dead. Many people were beginning to recognize that Jesus was more than a Rabbi or even a prophet. Could it be that he was the long-awaited messiah, king of Israel?

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, tensions were high. Two views of Jesus were in conflict. The Jewish religious leaders saw him as a trouble-making, rabble-rouser and were plotting his death. Many of the people were expecting a great liberator who would free them from Roman oppression and re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel. The manner of Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem announced his kingship without contradicting its unexpected nature. Before the king would reign, he would choose to die.

In his Gospel, Matthew is careful to highlight all the ways Jesus is announcing his kingship and fulfilling prophecy. As we study the triumphal entry this week, we will be looking at several Old Testament passages that Jesus is fulfilling. For today, read the central passage carefully and record what you observe.

Matthew 21:1–17

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion,
'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

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

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

¹² Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³ "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.

¹⁶ "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.

"Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise?'"

¹⁷ And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

- In your own words, describe the scene as Jesus enters the city. What would it have been like to be there among the crowd?
- Compare the reaction of the crowd with the reactions of the religious leaders. Why is hatred of Jesus growing among the leaders?
- Underline any part of the passage where Jesus either fulfills or quotes Scripture.
- Many people in our world are comfortable thinking of Jesus as a great teacher or even as a Savior, but struggle with the idea that he is a King. Why do you think that is?
- What about you? What would it mean for you to take this week to focus on Jesus as your King?

Prayer

As you prepare for Palm Sunday and Easter, ask the Father to prepare your heart to receive his Word. If it is helpful, use this prayer to guide you.

Father God, I want to worship you earnestly and fully during this Easter season. I know that there are callous places in my heart that have been toughened by rebellion and sin. Please reveal those areas and soften my heart so that I might trust you more deeply and obey you more completely. Help me respond to others with more tenderness and compassion so that I might imitate your Son in showing love and grace. I love you Father and long to know and love you more. In Jesus' precious and holy name, I pray. Amen.

Day 2

During the Christmas season, we marvel at the remarkable way the king of the universe comes into the world — born to an ordinary Jewish girl, laid in a manger and attended by shepherds. Throughout his life, Jesus continued to defy all expectations and do the unexpected.

If a human author was writing the story of the Messiah, they might depict him rubbing shoulders with the religious, political and social elite in Jerusalem. Surely the King would surround himself with the “important” people of his day. Yet from what we can glean from the Gospels, Jesus spent little time in the capital city. Matthew, Mark and Luke show him in Jerusalem as an adult only during the week before his crucifixion, while John shows him going to the city only to observe the expected Jewish holidays.

Jesus lived most of his life among ordinary people, out in countryside or in the villages where they worked and lived. While he gained notoriety among these people, he may have been relatively unknown in the city. It is not surprising that Jesus causes such a stir when he arrives in Jerusalem and that many in the city wonder “Who is this?”

Read the Word

Matthew 21:1–11

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

*⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”*

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

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¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

- What did Jesus ask the disciples to get for him? What reason does Matthew give in verse 4?

- What actions does the crowd take? What do they do? What do they shout?

Reflect

All four Gospels record Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They depict him riding a donkey as the crowd lays their cloaks before him, waves palm branches and shouts "Hosanna!" Jesus' arrival is being treated as a royal procession. Scholars note similar elements to other royal processions recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and spoken of in Jewish history (see 2 Kings 9:13, 2 Samuel 16:1–2, and 2 Maccabees 10:7).¹

"Hosanna" is a Greek form of the Hebrew words translated "Save us" in Psalm 118:25. This Psalm was among those commonly used during Jewish festivals. In Jewish worship, "Hosanna" had already come to be used more as an exclamation of praise than a prayer.² Also from Psalm 118 come the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

All the Gospels imply that Jesus is being heralded as Savior and King by the crowds, but by quoting from the prophets, only Matthew makes a direct connection to the prophecy Jesus is enacting.

Compare Zechariah 9:9 to Matthew 21:5. Notice what line Matthew omits.

Zechariah 9:9

*⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Matthew quotes Zechariah and helps us see that Jesus' clear intention was to fulfill the prophecy that had been recorded about him hundreds of years before. Matthew makes one significant change to emphasize that this time Jesus is coming as a gentle Savior, not a conquering King. He omits the description "righteous and victorious."

There will be victory, but not one his admirers were expecting. Rome would seem to triumph over "the Son of David" (Matthew 21:9) and the "prophet from Nazareth," (Matthew 21:11) but once again, the superficial interpretation of the events surrounding Jesus' time on earth would be wrong. The King would sacrifice his life to save those oppressed by an enemy even more powerful than the great empire of Rome. He would conquer the enemy that enslaves all of humanity — sin and death.

In verse 10 of Zechariah, the prophet goes on to describe the King as one who will "proclaim peace to the nations" and whose "rule will extend from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth." The angels announced "peace to those on whom his favor rests" when Jesus was born (Luke 2:14), and that peace became available to all upon his death and resurrection. Through his sacrifice, peace between holy

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 67.

² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 1*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 303.

God and rebellious humanity was assured, and the peaceful reign of a loving, wise and powerful King was inaugurated.

Revelation 19 tells us that when Jesus comes again, he will ride a white horse and “with justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns.” (verses 11–12). No one will ask “Who is this?” Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that he is the King of kings and the Lord of Lords. When his kingdom comes in its fulfillment, all who oppose him will perish. The time to pledge allegiance to King Jesus is now.

Pray

Jesus will one day come in fierce power and his authority will be undeniable. But today, he gently beckons us to come and submit to his reign, because it is only through him that we can find life and peace. Praise God that because you have been changed by the Spirit, you can approach the Father as a beloved child. Take some time today to praise your Savior and King who offers rescue from sin and death.

Day 3

The temple had enormous significance to the Jewish people. Built on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, the temple’s presence would have dominated the city’s landscape. Because it signified their status as God’s chosen nation, the temple had been a source of pride for the Jewish people for generations. It had been designed by God to be a place where he could dwell with his people. It is not surprising that Jesus would stake a messianic claim to this holy site.

Jesus has made his triumphal entry into the city. By disrupting “business as usual” in the temple courts and healing the afflicted, Jesus is again proclaiming that the Messiah has come.

Read the Word

Matthew 21:12–14

¹² Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³ “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.

- Where did Jesus go after he arrived in the city?
- What did Jesus do there?

“Cleansing” the temple

The scene for this confrontation is the Court of the Gentiles, a huge enclosure around the temple. Passover brought Jewish pilgrims from all over to Jerusalem to offer the appropriate sacrifices. Those from out of town needed to procure animals for their sacrifices and since the temple had its own currency, vendors and money changers would have been plentiful during the festival. Jesus takes issue with the

commerce taking place in the temple courts. The question is why?

There is evidence from Jewish sources that these sellers and money changers took advantage of the poor who came to offer their sacrifices to Yahweh. It is not hard to imagine Jesus angrily objecting to such treatment. Yet Matthew is careful to note that Jesus drove out those who were selling *and* buying. So perhaps there is more to Jesus' actions.

The prophets of old had anticipated the day when the Messiah would come to renew and purify the temple, not only from the desecration brought by pagan conquerors, but from the false worship of God's own people.³

Commentator R.T. France offers this interpretation:

“It seems, then, that it is not any specific malpractice that Jesus rejects, but the whole system of sacrificial worship which had developed into big business, and particularly the temple authorities who had allowed its commercial aspect to become enshrined within the temple precincts...It was a dramatic gesture, an acted parable, for those with eyes to see, that ‘something greater than the temple is here’ (Matthew 12:6)”⁴

Jesus, speaking as God quotes Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Let's look at these verses in their context.

Isaiah 56:7

*7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”*

Jeremiah 7:9–11

9 “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known,¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things?¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching!” declares the Lord.

The Court of the Gentiles was to be a place where all the nations could come and encounter the God of Israel, the one true God. Outcasts and foreigners were to be welcomed to worship God along with his people.

The people of God were supposed to come to the temple in humble contrition for sin and in gratitude for God's mercy. According to Jeremiah, they were committing grave sins and practicing idolatry but assuming that their status as God's chosen people would save them. They thought their ethnic identity obligated God to look favorably on them. Many who came to the temple in Jesus' day were counting on

³ R. T. France, [Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 305.

⁴ Ibid.

the same.

Jesus is announcing judgment on the current state of temple worship while insisting that God's plan has always been to welcome all people to come to worship and receive his mercy. Jesus is not just the Jewish King and Messiah, but the Savior and King of the whole world. Repentant Jews and Gentiles alike would experience his grace and forgiveness.

Healing the afflicted

Jesus further demonstrates that a new era is dawning by healing those in the temple courts. The miraculous healings are another sign that the true King is here.

Earlier in his Gospel, Matthew relays the account of when John the Baptist sends his followers to speak to Jesus. John is in prison and is understandably confused about how events are unfolding. The Messiah had come, and yet he is about to be executed by an evil king. Was Jesus really the one they'd been waiting for? Jesus answers John by drawing his attention to the miraculous signs Jesus is doing. "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Matthew 11:5).

Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would come to save. He would open the eyes of the blind, unstop the ears of the deaf and that the lame would "leap like a deer." (Isaiah 35:4–6). By focusing on the miraculous acts of mercy and compassion he was performing, Jesus assures John that yes, he is the one they'd been waiting for!

Jesus will not just be the king over all nations, but the king over all nature. The power of disease, tragedy and death will be broken by Jesus Messiah. The King will set all things to right and his love and grace are already offered to all people.

Pray

In this passage we see Jesus' kingly authority and his great love. How is it comforting for you to recognize both Jesus' kingly authority and his great love? Pray that you recognize and trust in God's love for you and that because you trust your Father and King, you will submit to his authority over your life.

Day 4

Palm Sunday is a few days away and will mark the beginning of Holy Week — a week when Christians around the world reflect on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. If you’ve ever wondered why it’s called Palm Sunday, the passage we are studying this week gives you the answer. As Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a donkey, the people spread their cloaks along his path and wave palm fronds. This journey is often called the “triumphal entry” because of it marks the peak of Jesus’ popularity with the people and resembles a royal procession that a king might make as he enters a city under his reign.

Today we are looking at one final scene from the events surrounding this procession. Once again, we will find that through it, Jesus is proclaiming himself Messiah and King.

Read the Word

Matthew 21:14–17

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.

¹⁶ “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him.

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read,

*“From the lips of children and infants
you, Lord, have called forth your praise?”*

¹⁷ And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

Reflect

The religious leaders were incensed by many of the things Jesus said and did, but the Gospels record several occasions where they became murderous with rage. Though Matthew doesn’t record their reaction in this passage, I suspect that this was one of those occasions. If they had not already been plotting to kill Jesus, his interaction with him in the temple courts would have sealed his fate.

Since entering Jerusalem, Jesus’ activities were not only drawing crowds and gaining the attention of the teachers of the law, but verse 15 indicates that the chief priests were there as well. While miraculous healings are indeed “wonderful,” the religious leaders felt anger rather than awe. They refused to see that God’s power, love and mercy is on full display. Instead they were indignant that a carpenter from Nazareth was getting this kind of recognition and praise.

Since his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus had enacted several prophecies that declared his kingship. But by quoting Scripture the way he does in Matthew 21:16, he is declaring himself God.

Let’s look at Psalm 8, the psalm from which Jesus quoted.

Psalm 8:1–2 (NET)

*¹O Lord, our Lord,
how magnificent is your reputation throughout the earth!
You reveal your majesty in the heavens above!
²From the mouths of children and nursing babies
you have ordained praise on account of your adversaries,
so that you might put an end to the vindictive enemy.*

- Why has God “ordained praise” from the “mouths of children”? What does this praise accomplish?
- Compare Psalm 8:2 with Matthew 21:16. What do you notice?

Psalm 8 is a stunning and uplifting song of praise to God. It presents the worshipper with the reality of a Creator who is so incomprehensibly powerful that he set each star in its place, yet inexplicably cares for each human being. (If you're feeling discouraged today, stop now and read the whole thing. Let it speak to your soul!) The heavens in all their enormity and tiny infants in all their weakness speak to the glory of God and shout his praise.

By quoting the psalm the way he does, Jesus is clearly likening the praise he is receiving from the children in the temple courts to that which is given to only to God. Because they knew the Scriptures, it is likely that the religious leaders understand the implications of Jesus' words and their indignation would have turned to rage. Jesus is equating himself with God and them with God's enemies. The proclamation of the children shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” is not only true, it's a means of defeat for those who oppose God.

No doubt these leaders had deluded themselves into thinking that by opposing Jesus, they are protecting the honor of God and the sanctity of the temple. Even as they watch the blind receive sight, they cannot see the glory of the one standing right in front of them. Even as they watch the lame walk, they refuse to stand and walk according to the truth.

We'd like to think that if we had been standing in those temple courts, we would have recognized Jesus for who he was and received him as Messiah and King. But we'd be wise to remember that the human heart has an endless capacity for self-delusion. Pride coupled with bitterness, jealousy and resentment is a powerful elixir. It can empower us to believe that we are the ones worthy of honor or praise. Our indignation when we don't receive it can warp our view of God and others.

The teachers of the law and chief priests should have known God. They had studied his Word and served him in his temple. Yet they not only failed to recognize their own Messiah but wanted to see him destroyed. On Good Friday they thought their plan had succeeded. Jesus was in the grave and his followers had either turned against him or scattered. But God's plan was so much bigger than they could have imagined. Christ the King would be raised from the dead and one day his reign will be fully realized on earth as it is in heaven.

Pray

As the Spirit to reveal to you anyways that bitterness, resentment, pride or arrogance are twisting your thinking about who he is. Then praise him for being your eternal king!

Day 5

The passage we studied this week proclaims that Jesus is King! How will you respond to his reign over your life? Spend time in prayer and reflection asking the Spirit to apply God's truth to your life.

Reflect

- Review Matthew 21:1–17. How is Jesus proclaiming himself King?
- Which of these displays of Jesus' kingship resonates most with you today?

Connect

This week we saw Jesus ride into Jerusalem heralded by the crowd as Savior and King. A few days later he would be hanging from the cross in apparent defeat. It's not what those who shouted his praises expected. So often God defies our expectations too.

Having faith in God means trusting in him even when his ways are inscrutable to us. It means that we pledge ourselves to King Jesus and obey him even when it's difficult. We worship him as God, believing that the one who designed the universe has a plan for us as well. We trust that he is the great healer, even when we or those we love are not rescued from sickness and death. We believe in a future resurrection and the return of a victorious King who will conquer all evil and set everything right.

It's not always easy to have that kind of faith. But Easter reassures us that our trust is not in vain. We can trust the love of a Savior who would suffer and die for us. We can trust in the power of a God who raises the dead. The simple gospel truth made real to us by the Spirit's presence can see us through times of struggle and doubt. Your King is here. He is good, wise and mighty and he will rescue us his people.

Respond

- How do you need to respond to King Jesus? Are there areas of your life that you have not submitted to his reign? Ask the Spirit to help you discern rebellious attitudes and submit to Jesus. It's the better way by far.
- What comfort do you need from your King? Where are you doubting his wisdom, power or love?
- Who can you introduce to King Jesus? Easter is coming up and people may be more interested in hearing about Jesus or going to church with you. Who can you invite?