

Triumphal Entry in Jerusalem

Luke 9:18-27; Matthew 21:1-11

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Introduction

I live in a nice, relatively modern neighborhood of Cairo in a street full with new cars. But every now and then a shepherd leads a flock of sheep or goats through our street. And sometimes a farmer from across the Nile comes in our street, riding on a donkey. Imagine that. If the donkey walks real fast, the legs and the whole body of the man move very fast with the donkey. What would you do? Get your camera, take a few nice photo's, it looks so strange, so outlandish...! Picturesque!

As Christians we are so used to speak of the story that we have read in the Gospels as 'the Triumphal Entry of our Lord Jesus' in Jerusalem. But what a strange story actually... Jesus Christ riding a donkey, people waving palm leaves, and putting their coats on the road so that the donkey walks over it.

Who is this?

The city of Jerusalem was confused, 'Who in the world is this?' Indeed, who is this... and what is happening! Why are the crowds so excited? Let us look carefully at

this story for some answers. We will also consider how this story impacts us as Christians, and as a Church. I think it teaches us some valuable lessons. Let us look at the background to the story first.

I have the privilege of leading a media organization in the Arab World. Maybe this has distorted my view of reality, but I propose we look at this story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem by first looking at the set, and only after that, we zoom in on the actors.

At the beginning of the story, Jesus and his disciples have come close to Jerusalem, after a long trip all the way from Galilee in the north of Israel. They approached Jerusalem from the east; the previous day they had been in Jericho. Now they have reached the village of Bethfage - the present day Palestinian village called Kafr at-Tur.

These villages were eastern of the Mount of Olives, and behind that mountain, was Jerusalem. Jesus had come within a few kilometers of Jerusalem, but could not see the city yet, because the Mount of Olives was in between.

The roads must have been very busy, as it was the weekend before Passover, what we now call Easter. According to the Jewish writer Josephus, who wrote in the first century AD, Passover meant that Jerusalem grew from a few hundred thousand people to over two million. So the roads were packed; the city was a mess, as people came from all over Israel and the Roman Empire to sacrifice their sheep for obtaining forgiveness for their sins.

Think of those roads, clogged with people, and of the shiploads of sheep, ready to be butchered. It was busy, stinking, celebrative, full of excitement and religious and nationalist fervor. Maybe comparable to the Islamic Hajj, when 2 million people descend on the small city of Mecca. All hotels and hostels were packed and the roads were crawling with people from all over the world. Only a few more days, and the city was going to be, literally, a bloody mess.

A delight for the Jews. A disaster for the occupying Roman armies. With the fear of nationalist uprisings always in the air, the Roman soldiers must have had some stiff talks from their officers to be extra careful. The city had tripled in size, imagine the crowd-control problems.

Now the camera zooms in to Jesus. Let us look more closely at him, as we have set the set.

Our Lord Jesus Christ and the cheering well wishers have come close to Bethfage; Jesus did something strange there. He asked some of his friends to go into the village, and get a donkey with her colt. A colt is a young donkey no one had sat on yet.

Jesus predicted they would find a donkey tied to a house; they would have to untie the animal, and if people would ask what they were doing – stealing a donkey? – they would have to answer that the Lord needed it.

A strange command. It is like going here into the street, breaking into a car, and when a policeman or the owner comes, you say: 'Pastor such and such needs it'.

But the disciples obeyed, and they were allowed to use the donkey. If you read the same story as described by the evangelist Mark, you will see that they promised to return the donkey as soon as they could.

Why did our Lord Jesus want a donkey *with its colt*? This was a deliberate and calculated action. He did this because He wanted to make a point. Jesus knew the prophets of the Old Testament; let me read some verses from Zechariah 9:8-10, and listen to these words through the ears of a

nation that is occupied and oppressed by Roman armies, and that awaits liberation. Zechariah quotes God, saying:

I will defend my house [i.e. the Temple] against marauding forces.

Never again will an oppressor overrun my people, for now I am keeping watch.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Jesus knew these verses, and the people knew them also quite well. They were waiting for the Messiah to come to Jerusalem riding on the colt of a donkey. Jesus now decided to fulfill this prophecy.

Now the camera takes a wide shot, to give us a good view of the crowds.

The crowds on the road to Jerusalem were electrified when Jesus mounted that young donkey. In order to understand this, let me

go back in time for a moment. What had happened during the 24 hours before this event?

St Matthew in his gospel describes that Jesus had just traveled through Jericho. There, Jesus had touched the eyes of two blind men, as they shouted out to Him: Lord, son of David, have mercy on us...and they received their sight; they followed Jesus and his growing group of disciples.

These blind men had just been healed, and they were at Bethfage now... One of them was called Bartimaeus, as we learn from the gospel of St Mark.

These people were among the followers of Jesus, and there were many others who had seen great miracles while Jesus journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem. This group of Jesus and his followers made their way along the road to Jerusalem mixing with many other pilgrims, chatting about the events of the last few weeks.

Jesus had even raised Lazarus from the dead. Actually, just hours before the moment when Jesus asks for two donkeys, they had passed the home of this Lazarus, while traveling through Bethany.

No wonder these masses of travelers were electrified. Excited. And when Jesus ordered the young donkey, and actually sat on it, the excitement was pal-

pable. A young wild donkey needs to be broken in first? It kicks, it bites, it bucks. It needs a lot of training before it allows someone to ride it.

As a boy, I must have been 10 years old or so, it one day entered into my mind that I should sit on a cow that was standing right beside a fence. No donkeys in Holland, but lots of Frisian cows. I was on my way to school on my bicycle, so I put the bicycle down, I climbed the fence, and lowered myself on the cow.

My moment of elation did not last long... within a fraction of a second I found my rear-end in the grass. The brains of young boys are unique, hard to understand....

The Lord Jesus sat on the donkey, and the animal did not throw him off. A colt that readily accepts Jesus to mount it? A person who raises people from the dead and makes the blind see? The people understood the claim of Jesus. He is the King whom Zechariah spoke about! The king, riding a wild donkey into Jerusalem! Salvation is near!

Some disciples had put their cloaks on the donkey, and other people began to put their coats on the dirt road, so that the donkey could walk over it. This was a symbol of great humility and reverence by those Jews, in honor of

the King who was to enter Jerusalem.

The mass of people around Jesus went uphill to the Mount of Olives. Luke then writes that when Jesus came near the place where the road starts to go down from the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.

When the road went down. That means – when they had gone over the top of the Mount of Olives, and Jerusalem and its Temple was there, right in front of them, in all its magnificence. From the top of the Mount of Olives you could see over the valley, and there was Jerusalem, a breathtaking view, so close actually, that the noise of the city and the hundreds of thousands of sheep that were ready for slaughter within a few days, could be heard. The stench of a city full of pilgrims must have been overwhelming.

The people knew exactly that Jesus claimed that He was the one they had been waiting for, the one to liberate Jerusalem and the whole land. And they were spot on with the Bible verses they then began to quote from the Messianic Psalm 118.

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

Hosanna is a Hebrew word, it means 'Lord, save us'. The Hebrew name of Jesus, Yeshuah, is derived from the same verbal root, and means: JHWH, the Lord, saves. 'Save us! Son of David! You are the one God has sent.'

The fact that they quoted from this particular Psalm is not surprising, because during the Passover feast, this Psalm 118 was read again and again in the Temple, together with Psalms 113-117.

'Who is this', the people in the city asked when they saw the crowd wind down the road to the city gates.

The people with Jesus gave the answer: He is the prophet. Had God not announced that one day He would send a prophet like Moses to the nation? 'This is Him. The one we have waited for.'

They called him the Son of David – as God had promised to King David of Israel that one day a member of his family would be the messianic deliverer of Israel.

He is also called the King – that is what Zechariah says – because He will rule over His nation.

All this is true. But let us now also listen to what Jesus has to say of Himself. We hear the voice of Jesus!

When Jesus sent His disciples to the village to get the donkeys, they were told to say: 'The Lord needs them.'

The Lord. In the Greek that St Matthew used, this is: the KURIOS. In the Roman Empire, Kurios was the title for Emperor Tiberius in Rome. He was the Kurios, Lord of the whole world of those days. The ruler – not just of Israel but of all things on earth.

That was actually, from a Jewish viewpoint, blasphemous. How dare the Emperor in Rome use a title that was actually, properly speaking, a title for God. When the Jewish translators of the Hebrew Scriptures had translated the name of God, JHWH into Greek, they used the same word, Kurios. Lord.

So if Jesus gets His donkeys with the words 'The Lord needs them', it sounded very interesting in the ears of the Jews. Did Jesus claim to be the ruler of the world, like the Emperor? Did He claim to be the ruler of the universe, like God?

The suffering Lord

When Jesus said: 'The Lord needs the donkeys', and when he mounted the young animal, he very purposely set all the events of the final week of his life in motion. A week of suffering. But

none of the disciples and none of the people in the crowds realized this.

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew where he was going. He had chosen the confrontation, and now there was no way back. St Luke in his Gospel makes this very clear, as he describes some debates Jesus had with the Pharisees while he rode his donkey ever closer to the gates of Jerusalem.

The camera now has to shift to the Pharisees: Luke 19:39-44 says:

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

Because they were shouting:

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

"Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," Jesus replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.

The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls.

They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's

recognize the time of God's coming to you."

The Lord Jesus was told to rebuke His disciples, because the implication of what they shouted was perfectly well understood by the Pharisees. They claimed that Jesus was the expected Savior with divine authority.

And what did Jesus say? 'If my disciples stop praising me, then the stones will cry out!'

The stones? It would not surprise me a bit if Jesus was, while saying this, pointing at the stones of the city walls and of the Temple, rising high before Him. Thus again inviting the Jewish leaders to take action against what they perceived to be His blasphemy.

With His statement, Jesus placed himself above the importance City of God and the Temple of God. Of the stones of the city-walls and Temple He predicted in this same context that each stone would be broken down. That is exactly the opposite of the Jewish expectation; was the Messiah on his donkey not coming to defend the Temple and free it from its enemies? How confusing!

Jesus was much more important than the stones of the Temple... He was the Son of God.

During his whole ministry, Jesus had tried to keep his claims to divinity under the wraps. He

had told His disciples to not speak of his true nature. When St Peter confessed: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!' Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.

Jesus always tried to avoid the final conflict – a conflict that would most certainly come as soon as He would openly claim to be the Son of God. He had avoided this final conflict because He wanted decide when this final conflict would take place.

And now, He initiates his last Passover , saying: 'I am the Lord', and by riding on a donkey into Jerusalem He underlined his claims to being the Lord and Savior of Israel and the World.

Jesus, I believe, purposely planned this public self-revelation. I think He wanted to force the leaders of Israel to take action now. He had decided that His time had come and so He set in motion the plot to do away with Him. The Jewish leaders had not wanted to kill him at Passover; they wanted this to happen after the feast, because of the vast numbers of people in town.

Jesus knew what His life was heading for, and He wanted His end to come during the feast. The masses of sacrificial lambs in the city for being slaughtered at Passover were the right set for the death of Jesus– as the true and

only Lamb of God, who had come to die for the sins of the world. Holy Week has begun. Jesus has initiated the confrontation, and when He looks at the city of Jerusalem and its masses of people, He weeps. In Zechariah, the prophecy of the King who comes to save the land begins with 'Rejoice greatly', but Jesus weeps. The actual words used, speak of loud crying. No soft little weeping, not taking a little tear from the corner of his eye. Loud crying.

Well, Jesus knows what will happen to Him in the week ahead.

A few days earlier, Jesus had also wept, at the grave of Lazarus. He weeps for the misery of all human beings. For our lack of peace, our sicknesses, our death, our problems, our separation from God. He weeps for the children that are abused, for people who lose their jobs, for victims of war. For those who are torn apart inside.

Arriving at Jerusalem, Jesus cried over the fate of the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. Forty more years and the city was to be totally destroyed and many of its people murdered by Roman armies. This is not the victory the crowds were expecting from Jesus!

But had He not come to be the savior of his people! This seems

so contradictory! Jesus wept and said about Jerusalem:

If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. You do not recognize the time of God's coming to you!

Even for the disciples the meaning of what was happening was hidden, even though they used the right bible verses and were fully right to praise Him as Lord, King and Prophet.

Victory without a cross?

You know what I find very interesting? We read that the crowds cut palm branches from the trees, for putting those on the road and for waving with it. These palm branches were not part of how the feast of Passover was to be celebrated. You know at what feast the Jewish crowds were supposed to cut of palm branches?

Indeed, the feast of Tabernacles. That is the feast when Jews celebrate that they live securely in their land. They feast of final victory.

Once a year, the Jews build huts of palm branches, to stay in those huts for a while and to celebrate how God rescued them from Egypt, to live safely in their land.

The feast of tabernacles points to God eternal kingdom. During that Jewish feast, Psalm 118 was

also read all day long in the temple.

The crowds around Jesus anticipated the Feast of Tabernacles, symbol for the final, eternal, perfect Kingdom of God, without first focusing on the Passover. They wanted victory without a cross. They wanted God's Kingdom in the land and world peace, without sacrifice. They wanted Jesus to be their Prophet and King, but they had no clue that He first had to become their Priest, whose sacrifice was His own life.

For Christians this is an important matter. It is not only important for theological reasons, to get the point that our salvation depends on the death of Jesus Christ, and that His eternal victory was achieved exactly because He first went through the valley of his own death for our sins.

It also sets the pattern for our Christian life. Jesus told His disciples:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?

It is very worrying that many churches seem to have forgotten

this reality. Jesus shows us that His great victory was reached through suffering. He tells us, his followers, that we must not think that we can reach our final, eternal victory, without suffering.

The pattern of suffering first, then comfort, is set by our Lord himself, and there is no escaping from it. We cannot expect an easy life if we want to follow Him.

According to Jesus, there can only be one sort of Church of Jesus Christ; that is, a suffering church. The idea that only in some non-western countries the church is suffering, is strange – because following Jesus Christ means problems for all his followers. This is the normal Christian life.

Jesus had come to the city to be slaughtered as the final, perfect, sacrificial Lamb of God.

The people had no clue, not even Jesus' closest friends. They expected glory, not suffering. They wanted gain, no pain.

But for those who follow Jesus Christ, the pattern of death and suffering is imprinted on their genes. It is part of the DNA of the Church of our Lord.

Well, back to the Triumphal Entry of Jesus of Jesus into Jerusalem. It was triumphal because the people had a party, and Jesus triumphed in the sense that during the Holy Week that followed,

all things went as He had planned them. But the triumph was really in the suffering.

Conclusion

The entry into Jerusalem was tragic. The people did not understand that the peace of God would only come through the death of Jesus. No wonder Jesus wept. This was going to be His loneliest, ugliest week ever. For the sake of our salvation, He entered the week that would end in His death.

And therefore, during Holy Week, we weep with Him.

This week is a week of introspection for Christians all over the world, because we are aware that it was our sins that brought Him on the cross.

It is also a week of introspection, because we wonder: do we actually follow Him? Are we only cheering for Him when things go well, but do we deny Him as soon as the going gets hard?

Is the pattern of His life and suffering stamped on our heart, on our life?

**In the name of the Father and
the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen**