

Sermon: Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey

Mark 11:1-11

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Introduction

We have all seen men riding on donkeys. If the donkey walks fast, the legs of the man go forward and backward very fast. It looks quite funny, in my opinion. As Christians we are so used to speak of the story that we have read from Mark 11 as 'the Triumphal Entry of our Lord Jesus' in Jerusalem. But what a strange story actually. Jesus Christ riding a donkey. That does not look like triumph.

1 Who is this?

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

These villages were east of the Mount of Olives, and behind that mountain, was Jerusalem. Jesus was close but could not see the city yet, because the Mount of Olives was in between.

The roads were very busy, as it was the weekend before 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.

It was busy, stinking, celebrative, full of excitement and religious and nationalist fervor. Maybe comparable to the Islamic Hajj. 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.

Jesus did something strange. He asked some of his friends to go into the village, and get a young donkey that no one had sat on yet. He 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.

Why did our Lord Jesus want young donkey? This was a deliberate and calculated action. He wanted to make a point. Jesus knew the prophets of the Old Testament; Zechariah 9:8-10 says:

But I will encamp at my temple
to guard it against marauding forces.
Never again will an oppressor overrun my people,
for now I am keeping watch.
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.
10 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses 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 a donkey. Jesus now decided to fulfill this prophecy.

The crowds on the road to Jerusalem were electrified when Jesus mounted that young donkey. In order to understand this excitement, let me go back in time for a moment. What had happened during the 24 hours before this event?

St Mark describes that Jesus had just traveled through Jericho. There, Jesus had touched the eyes of the blind men Bartimaeus, as he shouted out to Him: 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.'

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:52)

Bartimaeus was with Jesus at Bethfage now, as one of the followers of Jesus. There were also many others who had seen great miracles while Jesus journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem. This group of people made their way along the road to Jerusalem mixing with many other pilgrims, talking of course with all those travelers about the events of the last few weeks. No wonder these masses of travelers were excited.

And when Jesus ordered the young donkey, and actually sat on it, the excitement was tangible. 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. The Lord Jesus sat on the donkey, and the animal did not throw him off.

The people immediately 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 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, to honor of the King who was to enter Jerusalem.

The mass of people around Jesus went uphill to the Mount of Olives. St Luke in his Gospel 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 suddenly there, right in front of them, in all its magnificence.

From the top of the Mount of Olives you could see over the Kidron 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!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

¹⁰ “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:9-10)

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.

2 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 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.

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, rebuke your disciples! I tell you, he 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 recognise the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:39-44)

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!’ 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.

With His statement, Jesus placed himself above the important 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 had 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, Jesus, I believe, purposely planned his public self-revelation. I think He wanted to force the leaders of Israel to take action *now*. He had decided that His time had now 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 wanted it now. During the feast

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 He is 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.

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 lonely people. For people who are depressed. 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 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 did not recognise the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:42, 44b)

3 Victory without a cross?

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.

Palm branches had to do with the feast of Tabernacles. That is when Jews celebrate that they live securely in their land. The feast of the 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 Gods 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 shows us that His great victory was reached through suffering. 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. Why do we call it Triumphal? 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 would really come through suffering.

Conclusion

The entry into Jerusalem was really 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? Or are we prepared to follow him on our road through life, through thick and thin – our Lord and our Redeemer.

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