

Triumphal Entry in Jerusalem **Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11**

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As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

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

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

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!"

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

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

Just imagine... you take a taxi to the countryside of Egypt. Then, in a tiny mud-village, on the dirt-roads of the qaryah, you see a crowd of people frantically shouting and waving palm branches. In the midst of the group is a man in a *jellabiyah*, riding 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 will you do? I would get my camera, make a few nice photo's, it looks so strange, so outlandish..! Picturesque!

As Christians we are so used to speak of this same scene in the Gospels as 'the Triumphal Entry of Jesus'. But what a strange story actually...

Jesus riding a donkey, people waving palm leaves, and putting their coats on the road so that the donkey walks over it. 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.

First: a look at the set, the décor

At the beginning of the story, Jesus and his disciples have come rather close to Jerusalem, after a long trip all the way from Galilee in the North. They approached Jerusalem from the east side, as the previous day they had been in Jericho. Now they approached the villages of Bethany and Bethfage. These villages were on the eastside of the Mount of Olives, and behind that mountain, was Jerusalem. Jesus had come with a few kilometers of Jerusalem, but could not see it yet because the Mount of Olives was in between.

The roads must have been very busy, as it was the weekend of 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. 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, celebrative, full of excitement and religious and nationalist fervor. Maybe a bit comparable to the Islamic Hajj, when 2 millions people descend on the small city of Mekka. All hotels and hostels packed and the roads swarming with people from all over the world.

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

When Jesus and his friends walked toward the Mount of Olives, they came close to a village called Bethfage, probably the present Palestinian village called Kefr at-Tur.

What did Jesus do

Jesus did something strange. When he came close to Bethfage, 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. Strange command. It is like going here into the street, breaking into car, and when the owner, or a policeman comes, you say: ‘bishop Derek needs it’. Yeah...

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

Why did Jesus want a donkey *with its colt*? This was a very purposeful decision of Him. He did this because He wanted to make a point. Jesus knew the prophets of the Old Testament; Let me read some verses form 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. God says:

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 a donkey. Jesus decided to fulfill this prophecy.

And 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 happened during the 24 hours before this event near the village of Bethfage?

Well, Matthew describes that Jesus traveled through Jericho, very close to Bethfage and Jerusalem. In Jericho Jesus 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, we learn from 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 mixed of course on the road to Jerusalem with the many Hajji's, pilgrims, and they spoke about the events of the last weeks. *Jesus had even raised Lazarus from the dead.* Actually, they had just visited his home hours before, while traveling through Bethany.

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

When was your last time you mounted a young wild donkey with no saddle, one that has not been broken in? 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 my mind that I should sit on a cow that was standing right beside a fence. No donkey's 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. I did not last long... and within a fraction of a second found my rear-end in the grass.

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 Zechariah spoke about! The king, riding a wild donkey into Jerusalem! Salvation is near!

Some disciples had put their cloaks on the donkey, and the other people began to put their coats on the dirt-road, so that the donkey could walk over it... 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 on the Mount of Olives, and Luke then writes that when Jesus came near the place where the road goes down 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 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 the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word Hoshia-na. 'save us'. The Hebrew name of Jesus, Yeshua, 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 was read again and again in the Temple, together with Psalm 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 waited for.

They called him the Son of 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 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 Jesus Himself .

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 of Matthew this is: the KURIOS. In the Roman Empire, this 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 translated the name of God, JHWH, they used the word Kurios.

You may object: but did Jesus speak Greek? Yes He did. There are instances in the Gospels where theologians believe Jesus actually spoke Greek. But in this instance, I assume He spoke in Aramaic. If that is so, Matthew deemed it best to translate the term Jesus used, with KURIOS. That was the equivalent of the Aramaic term.

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? Did He claim to be the ruler of the universe?

During his whole ministry, Jesus had tried to keep his claims to divinity under the wraps. He told his disciples to not speak of his true nature. He 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.

But now, He initiates this last Passover with 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. Jesus 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 *decor* for the death of Jesus— as the true and only Lamb of God, who had come to die for the sins of the world.

The moment when Jesus said: The Lord needs the donkeys, and when he mounted the young animal, set all events of the final week of suffering in motion.

Though he was in the form of God,
He did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Jesus knew where he was going. He had chosen the confrontation, and now there was no way back. Luke in his Gospel makes this very clear, as Luke describes some debates Jesus had with the Pharisees while he rode his donkey ever closer to the gates of Jerusalem. Luke 19:39-44 says:

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

that is, 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 coming to you."

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 his blasphemy.

By saying this, Jesus placed himself above the importance of the city of God and the Temple of God. Of both city-walls and temple He predicted in this same context that each stone would be broken down.

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 weep, 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 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.

Arriving at Jerusalem, Jesus cried over the fate of the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. 40 more years and the city will be totally destroyed and many of its people murdered by Roman armies.

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.

You know what I find very interesting? We read that the crowds were putting their coats on the road, and they cut off palm branches for also putting 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 off 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. 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 expected the Kingdom of God without the Passover, without Easter. 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.

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. We call this the Triumphal Entry of Jesus – because He triumphed in these sense that during the Holy Week that followed, all things went as Jesus had planned them.

But it was also a Tragic Entry. 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 were our sins that brought Him on the cross. And we reverently worship our Lord, who laid down his divinity and died for our sake.

Amen