

Who is This?

Matthew 21:1-11 (Palm Sunday - April 5, 2020)

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, telling them, "Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, "Who is this?" And the crowds were saying, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

"Who is this?" The whole city of Jerusalem wanted to know. Put yourself in the shoes of the people in Jerusalem. There are already hundreds of people in town who wouldn't normally be there. They had come to the city because it was Passover time and it was customary that many made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover, a festival which remembered God's saving from slavery in Egypt. None of them were being hailed like this man was. The people who had come with him were treating him like a king. Yet nothing seemed really special about him. It didn't seem like there was any real reason to lay palm branches and cloaks while he rode into Jerusalem and down the streets on a donkey. In fact, it didn't seem like there was a reason for such praise as they shouted "hosanna", a Hebrew word that means "save us, please". Yet it was a word that had become not just a prayer, but also a statement of praise - something like "hail". "Who is this?" they wondered.

Many of those in the crowd who were laying branches and cloaks and shouting praises were people who had followed Jesus. Others maybe were picked up along the way and were taken in by the wave of commotion. So those within the crowd answered their question with a simple statement, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." The people of Jerusalem may have heard of Jesus before. News had spread about all of the things he had done over the last three years, but a majority of that time was spent up in the northern region of Galilee. Many of them probably had never seen Jesus before. And even if they had seen him and witnessed miracles or heard him preach, this question seemed very natural. Whenever you see and hear such a commotion like what happened on that first Palm Sunday, it would cause you to wonder too, "What is going on? Who is this?"

Surely the crowd's answer of calling Jesus a prophet was correct. He was a prophet sent from God who spoke God's Word to the people. That's what prophets did. They served as messengers bringing to the people what God wanted said. However that answer just doesn't quite cover the question, does it? When was the last time a prophet received such a welcome like this with palm branches being waved and layed on the road in front of him or cloaks lining the streets for a welcome? If someone was simply a prophet, he wouldn't get the accolades and praise Jesus was getting as his borrowed donkey walked down the streets of Jerusalem. There has to be something more to Jesus. It doesn't make sense that a prophet would be welcomed in this way. It seems to be more of a way people would welcome their king's arrival.

Perhaps that's part of the reason why at the end of the week the crowds who praised him abandoned him later. They saw him simply as a great prophet and nothing more. Or at the very least if they wanted him to be something more than just a prophet, a king as their actions and words indicated, then he didn't fit the kind of king they wanted. Their praise of "hosanna" didn't fit their heart's desire and expectation. They knew who

Jesus was, at the very least on the surface. But let's turn back to the question at hand this morning that the whole city was asking, "Who is this?" We hear the answer of the crowds that he is a prophet, but we know he is much more than that. He indeed is a king worthy of all the praise and glory, the pomp and circumstance we see today on this Palm Sunday. He is the King of Glory worthy of our praise.

Matthew tells us that this ride of Jesus fulfills what was written by the prophet Zechariah. We heard the words of that prophecy a few minutes ago, **"Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! Look! Your King is coming to you. He is righteous and brings salvation. He is humble and is riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."** (Zechariah 9:9) Jesus is a king who came to the people to do what people often looked to a king to do for them - to save them and protect them from the enemy. Everything about the people's reaction to Jesus' coming was as if they were welcoming a king.

The people laid their outer cloaks on the road before Jesus as his stallion rode into Jerusalem. They cut palm branches off of the trees laying them on the road in front of Jesus too all so that his stallion wouldn't walk on the humble dirt of the city. They were using what they had access to to roll out the "red carpet" for Jesus and then he was given glorious praise. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" The crowds praised Jesus like a king giving him glory and honor. They were right to do so. Jesus is indeed the King of glory.

The city's question of wondering who was riding into Jerusalem is also asked and answered by King David himself in Psalm 24, a psalm often connected with Palm Sunday. **"Lift up your heads, you gates. Lift yourselves up, you ancient doors, and the King of Glory will come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, you gates. Lift up, you ancient doors, and the King of Glory will come in. Who is he, this King of Glory? The Lord of Armies - he is the King of Glory."** (vs. 7-10) This King of Glory is God himself who receives glorious praise and honor that is due to him. Jesus is God who has come to do for us, his people, what the shouts of prayer and praise called for him to do: Save us, please! Certainly this is a glorious sight, but strangely we also see this King of Glory rides in humility.

Kings come to town with great pomp and circumstance - much like how the people welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. However a king wouldn't come in the manner that Jesus did. Look at this triumphant, glorious scene a little closer. The King of Glory could have come with all the power and glory of the Son of God. Jesus could have ridden a thunderstorm as his chariot with legions of angels striding beside him and creation itself singing the praise of its maker. But instead he comes not on a storm, but on a donkey. Jesus is not accompanied by heavenly warriors, but by simple fishermen and other disciples who have, let's face it, a spotty record of faith. Jesus did not come with the sound of creation singing, but to the shouts of fickle pilgrims who cheered him on Sunday, but would desert him by Friday. Jesus is praised like a glorious king, but when we look deeper we begin to see his humility.

So why did he come so humbly? Because he came not to rule us in an earthly kingdom. He came not to command us, but to invite us. He came not to demand anything from us, but to give everything for us. He comes in the name of the Lord to save us. In humility is how Jesus would answer our pleas of "Hosanna". The King of Glory set it all aside, and we see him coming today humbly riding on a donkey, a beast of burden and labor and humility. In such humility Jesus came to save us from the sins that made us prisoners of its grasp and condemned slaves to its ally of death. We heard in our second reading today from Philippians the Apostle Paul telling us how far he rode in humility to save. Paul wrote, **"Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross."** (2:6-8)

“Who is this?” The whole city wanted to know. He is, as David said in Psalm 24, he is the King of Glory. However today and this week we see the King of Glory enter the depths of humility as one of us. He rides humbly toward the battlefield of Calvary to wage war with Satan, sin, and death, to do what our prayers ask and our praises declare he does: Hosanna! Save us. Yet after this King of Glory enters the depths of humility we will see an even greater and glorious sight as he is exalted in resurrection victory. No more humility, only the glory of victory and a king worthy of all honor and praise.

“Who is this?” It is indeed Jesus. He is the Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Today we see a strange mixture of a king in glory on a triumphant glorious ride into Jerusalem and a king who we know will trudge out to Calvary in humility to save you and I from the enslavement of our sins, something only Jesus could do for us.

My friends, today we began Holy Week. This Holy Week will most likely be one none of us have ever experienced. It may not seem like much like Holy Week. Today we couldn't raise our palm branches in praise of Jesus. Maundy Thursday we'll spend time in the upper with Jesus but we won't be able to receive the Lord's Supper. Good Friday we'll stand beneath his cross, but we won't be standing side by side. Easter morning we won't be able to raise our voices together in glorious praise declaring this simple joyous news: Jesus Christ is risen today! All this we won't be able to do together here in this building, but it doesn't change the facts of what Jesus has already done.

This week we walk with me from wherever you are. Together we see glory and humility all for us. Today, our king came to us gently and rode on a donkey praised with palms and cloaks and voices. Sit with me in the upper room and reflect on the wondrous meal of his body and blood in the bread and wine which he gives for forgiveness and the strengthening of our faith. Stand with me at the foot of the cross and see him dying. Yet marvel with me at such love. Then look with me into the empty tomb and hear the news that Jesus is not there. He has risen. My friends, this is a week to raise your palms of prayer and praise for the glory and humility we see. “Hosanna! Hail the King of Glory!” Amen