

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

5 “Tell the daughter of Zion,
 Look, your king is coming to you,
 humble, and mounted on a donkey,
 and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed 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!”

10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

Phil. 2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

In my family we had a saying growing up. Politics and religion don't mix. But, as I got older I began to notice that despite what we said politics and religion often did mix or in some cases they clashed.

In fact Palm Sunday is one of the most politically charged Sundays in the church year. But, it is not politics as usual. Jesus is deliberately making a political statement when he rides into Jerusalem. Jesus is claiming to be the king, God's Messiah.

The fact that Jesus did this on purpose is shown by the details in our scripture for today. He directed his disciples to secure the animal upon which he rides. This is not accidental parade. This is a calculated political statement.

But, the so-called triumphant entry is not so triumphant. The king who enters Jerusalem does not ride a war horse at the head of conquering army. No, he bounces into town on the back of a donkey.

Our anthem states it well. Who is that guy riding on a donkey? What kind of strange sight is this?

Zechariah 9:9 came to Matthew's mind as he described this odd scene. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a colt."

That's such a strange statement. I have seen many politicians in my time. And most of them talk about victory and triumph. But, very few talk about and embrace humility.

Jesus is challenging the powers that be this day. His entry into Jerusalem is a symbolic act of defiance.

GANDHI AND JESUS VISIT

Mahatma Gandhi came to England when there was a crisis between England and its colony, India. Gandhi did not go first to the leaders of that country. Instead, he first visited the textile workers in Liverpool, the very ones who had been hurt the most by the boycott of English textiles in India.

He tried to explain why they were boycotting the English textiles and why he was leading India in this way. Gandhi was powerful because he refused to play politics as usual. Powerful political leaders upon arriving in a country often pay their homage to other powerful political leaders.

Gandhi did something new. He arrived not with a conquering army. He was not dressed impressively. And yet he was able to change things. There was a new kind of power in his humble but effective manner.

So it was with Jesus. Jesus demonstrated in Jerusalem that true security is not found in raising an army and running the Romans out of town. True security is found in the Lord.

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” That’s what they sang long ago when Jesus entered the city. And that’s the challenge that faces us today.

Can we sing this song of hope? Can we rejoice at the sight of a Savior who comes to us in such a humble way?

All religion is political, and all politics is religious. That’s especially true in the modern age. Think about it. Politics has become a kind of religion for many people. With evangelical fervor people tout the advantages of a particular political party or point of view.

Politicians portray themselves as mini messiahs. They and their policies are the “only hope” for our country. They and the armies they raise will give us security we crave. Do we really believe that any politician or any army can truly protect us?

BILLY GRAHAM VISITS

William Willimon talks about the time when Billy Graham came to speak at Duke Chapel. The week before Graham arrived the office of university security called and said that they had to have an urgent meeting with Willimon who was at that time the University chaplain.

At the meeting he said that they asked questions like, “Will Graham be bringing his own security people?” They said that if he was that they needed to be registered with the university police. If he didn’t bring his own security people then more security personnel would have to be assigned to the event.

Then they told the chaplain that the chapel must be emptied for at least three hours before the service so that a thorough search could be made for bombs. And so forth.

Willimon said that he dutifully called Dr. Graham and asked what security arrangements he had made. And Billy cheerfully replied, “I have the Lord as my security. I plan to fly into Raleigh-Durham on Saturday, rent a car and drive over to the hotel myself. It’ll just be me.”

The university saw Billy Graham as another celebrity, a big name who needed to be protected. But apparently Graham saw things in a different way. The Lord was his security, and he was quite content to ride into town in the normal way.

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

Quite often we allow political leaders to have too much power because we forget that the Lord is our security.

Dictators often begin their reign with an honest desire to serve and protect their people. But, after a while that changes. Lord Acton's maxim takes hold. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

That's how it has always been from the time of the Roman Empire to the politics of today. Would be messiahs are always taking themselves too seriously.

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is an attempt to break the power of corruption and the corruption of power.

Notice that Jesus doesn't go to the palace when he enters Jerusalem. He doesn't go to the halls of power for an important consultation with the political leaders in the place of power.

Jesus goes to temple. Jesus purifies the temple and gets it ready for the true worship of God. (Matthew 21:12-13)

Not only did Jesus challenge the political powers; Jesus also challenged the economic powers. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove them out of the temple. He said that their actions had turned God's house of prayer into a den of robbers.

According to Jesus security is not found in political or military or economic power. Those are false gods.

True power is found in prayer. True power is found by trusting in God for salvation. God is our hope. God is our peace. All the rest needs to be thrown out and ridiculed.

PASSION SUNDAY

Of course this is not only Palm Sunday. It is also Passion Sunday.

The powers that be do not like it one little bit when Jesus threatens their legitimacy. Jesus had quit preaching and had gone to meddling.

Jesus not only fulfilled the prophecy from Zechariah about the strange king who comes in humility on a donkey. Jesus will soon fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah, who wrote,

"... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

It won't take long before the empire strikes back. In just a few days Pilate, the long arm of the law will make his pronouncement about king Jesus. Crucify him.

The king who rides into Jerusalem does ride on to die.

But, why does he do that? What is the meaning of this journey toward the cross? How does the death of Jesus take away our sin?

What would it mean for us to become his disciples, to take up our cross and follow Jesus on this road to Jerusalem?

THE POWER OF HUMILITY

There are many answers to that question. But, this morning I would like to focus upon the meaning of the cross that Paul lifts up in his letter to the Philippians. The cross is about the power of humility.

We empty our lives in order to be filled by the Spirit. We must recognize that royalty can ride into town on a donkey and that peace does not have to come into the world at the barrel of a gun.

True peace comes through the power of a cross.

So how does that apply to us?

Paul tells us that the cross informs our approach to the world. Our attitude, our mindset should be the same as that of Jesus.

THE CROSS WAS A CHOICE

A cross is a horrible way to kill someone, and it was the way that Jesus was killed. The cross is a symbol of human weakness and mortality.

The cross is a symbol of evil and the terrible things that human beings do to other human beings.

And yet, according to our passage from Philippians, the cross also represents a choice that Jesus made. It was a choice to give up everything for the salvation of the world.

It was a choice to lower himself in order to raise us up.

It was a choice to give up divinity for humanity, to give up the glory of heaven for the struggles of mortality. It was a choice to give up being a king to become a slave.

And, in the end, in the ultimate act of humility, it was a choice to give up life for death.

This willingness to sacrifice for others represents the essence of success in the Christian life.

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

According to Paul, our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

In a world that encourages us to fill up in every way, Jesus encourages us to empty ourselves, to deny ourselves.

As Jesus lowered himself to become a human being so we are encouraged to embrace humility as a lifestyle.

I love the way the Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen talked about this aspect of the Christian life. He referred to it as the way of “downward mobility.”

That’s a great way to put it. In an upwardly mobile world, Jesus encourages us to go against the flow, to downsize, to give up the things of this world that we might gain what is really important.

I once had a discussion with recent retirees about how they had to downsize after retirement.

They said that at first they were reluctant to give up all of their “stuff”, but after they did it, they found that there was a certain freedom to simplifying their life. Their life was being controlled by their possessions and now they are much happier.

I think that this is true to a certain extent for almost all of us. As we strive to live the good life and fill our world with the things that we want, we separate ourselves from what is really important.

Jesus shows us that the way to true humanity is this way of downward mobility.

Paradoxically the goal of the Christian life is not to have more and more. It is to have less and less. There really is a joy for those who willingly give their life away to others with no strings attached.

THE STRUGGLE OF HOLY WEEK

But, in order to do this we must once again go through the struggle of Holy Week. Like Jesus we must struggle to let go and believe that God’s kingdom will come ... especially when it looks like everyone has abandoned us, and there is no hope.

Like Jesus we must struggle to believe in the power of resurrection when the dark night closes in on our life and all that we hold dear is taken away.

We would rather not face a time such as this. We would prefer to go straight from the cheers of Palm Sunday to the joyful proclamation of Easter.

But, it doesn’t work that way ... not in the liturgy of the church or in our lives. Faith does not come easily. It only comes as we take up the cross and follow Jesus.

I had a friend, a Methodist minister who had moved to the South from a church in the Northeast. He found that everyone seemed to be more religious in the South so he was sure that the celebration of Holy Week would be an extensive one.

But, he was disappointed.

No services were scheduled anywhere during Holy Week.

So, he asked someone in his rural congregation, “What do the people do on Good Friday here?”

And the old truck farmer replied,
“Oh, that’s the day we plant corn!”

Somehow Holy Week needs to be about more than planting corn.

Did you know that fully a third of the gospels are taken up with the story of the passion and crucifixion of Christ? This cross is at the heart of the gospel, and it seems to me that we need to take it to heart.

Someone asks me every year why we don’t have more Holy Week services, and I reply quite frankly, “We don’t have more services because no one comes to them!”

Now I know that people have other things to do, that some people are on vacation and so forth. But, I also think that one reason Holy Week services are not well attended is that the message is hard to hear.

The story of the crucifixion is painful. It is a struggle to go through a somber Good Friday service. And yet I have become convinced that unless we are willing to go through the struggle, we are not able to really understand the joy of Easter.

Life can be painful. Life can be a struggle.

And the story of the cross more than any other story gives us a hint of how God’s salvation can come through the struggle and the pain.

The story of the cross gives us hope that transcends our mortality. The story of the cross helps us give up the temporary for the glory of the eternal.

In this regard I think that the more formal, liturgical churches are better equipped to really help us understand the meaning of the gospel. Their highly symbolic and dramatic services give us an intuitive grasp of the sacrifice that was made on our behalf and the sacrifice that may be require of us as disciples of Christ.

In the fictional book, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator talks about this struggle. He says,

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“I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished. I am terrified that, this year it won’t happen; that, that year it didn’t.

Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But, Easter is the main event; if you don’t believe in the resurrection, you’re not a believer.”

Don’t let this week pass you by without spending at least some time with the story of the Passion of Christ and the story of the passion of your own life. Read without interruption the stories of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Let the hopes and fears of that week become a part of your life and prepare for the glory that lies ahead.

Amen.