

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
April 17, 2011 – Palm Sunday

Triumphal Entry
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Before reading text: Take a little test – Take 1000 and add 40 to it.
Now add another 1000. Now add 30. And another 1000. Now add 20.
Now add another 1000. Now add 10. What is the total?

How many of you got 5,000? If so, you're in good company.
Research shows that 98 percent of people who tackle this question get that answer. But the correct answer is 4100. Sometimes, our expectations of what we expect to happen get turned upside down. That's what happened to the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

[READ TEXT]

When Mahatma Gandhi came to England, in the height of the crisis between England and its colony of India, Gandhi went first to the textile workers in Liverpool, the very ones who had been hurt by the boycott of English textiles in India. He attempted to explain to them his hopes and goals and why he was leading India in this way. Gandhi therefore subverted

political expectations. Powerful political leaders, upon arriving in a country, first pay their respects to other powerful political leaders. Gandhi did otherwise, a man arriving not with a conquering army, but wrapped up in little more than a sheet.¹

In entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the way he did, on the back of a donkey, Jesus, like Gandhi, turns our expectations of a great leader upside down. Yes, it's a triumphal entry: as Jesus enters Jerusalem, the multitudes began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice, shouting "Hosanna" (literally, "save us" in Aramaic) and "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" and cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. John's Gospel tells us that they also waved palm branches. His entry into the city caused great turmoil – Matthew uses a very strong Greek word that literally means "shaken" or "trembled" or "quaked" – it's the root word of "seismic," indicating an earthquake. Earlier in his Gospel, Matthew notes that the whole city of Jerusalem shook with fear when Jesus was born (2:3); now when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the city trembles; and finally, at Jesus' death, it will shake once more, rocks will be split, and tombs will be opened (27:51-54).

¹ As told by William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, April 17, 2011, p. 14.

And yet, Jesus turns our expectations of a great leader upside down by making a parody of the people's messianic expectations. He doesn't ride into Jerusalem on a war horse, head of a conquering army, but bounces in on the back of a donkey, indicating that he's a king who's also a servant. He doesn't go to the palace to have an important conversation with the political rulers. Instead, after entering the city, he goes to the temple and purifies it.

Scholars have had a good laugh at the literalness with which Matthew shows prophecy being fulfilled. Zechariah 9:9 says, "Lo, your king comes to you; ...humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." At first glance, it may appear that Zechariah describes two animals – a donkey and a colt. Actually, though, only one animal is meant. "On a donkey, on a colt" is a textbook example of parallelism, commonly used in Hebrew poetry where something is said once and then repeated in a slightly different fashion. If you read the psalms, you'll see parallelism is commonly used.

So while in Mark, Luke, and John's gospels Jesus rides only one animal, here in Matthew we have the odd and amusing picture of Jesus trying to ride two animals at the same time. What is going on here? Perhaps Matthew misunderstood the parallelism of the text. Or perhaps Jesus rides one animal while leading the other, which is how an old movie I once saw about the life of Jesus handled the situation.

I think another explanation is more likely. Matthew portrays Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of prophecy. He wants to make it clear that the Messiah, the King, the Savior for whom the people have waited so long, is the one who is coming into the city. Tom Long states that Matthew very likely “found hidden meaning in the two different words in the prophetic text, ‘donkey’ and ‘colt.’ The donkey, a coronation animal, may have stood in Matthew’s mind for Jesus’ royal status as the Son of David, whereas the more humble colt may have represented Jesus’ lowly servant role.”²

The point is unmistakable. “King Jesus’ humble entrance into Jerusalem was, in the deepest sense, a fulfillment of God’s intent to save humanity as declared in scripture.”³ Royalty is on the way, but it is the kind of royalty that people have never seen before or since.

Two thousand years after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, another visitor came to the city, Germany's last kaiser, Wilhelm II. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through. After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate. The sign read, "A

² Tom Long, Matthew, p. 234-34.

³ Long, p. 235.

better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."⁴

Why did Jesus ride that little donkey into town that day? Rev. Joanna Adams thinks he did it to demonstrate true greatness to all the world. After the donkey came the cross. And it is there, right there, that you see greatness in all its glory.

When we say the Apostles Creed, we include the line, "He descended to the dead" after we say, "He was crucified, dead and buried." The old way of saying this line (which is the way I first learned it) was, "He descended into hell." "What a powerful acknowledgment that there is no human experience - no height, no depth, no loss, no pain, no apparently God-forsaken place, even the farthest reaches of hell - that Jesus has not entered. He descended into hell is immediately followed by the glad affirmation that he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven. It is here that the great reversal takes place. The servant becomes Lord. The humiliated one becomes the exalted one whose name is above every name. He ascended into heaven, and on Palm Sunday, and during this Holy Week ahead, we remember that he did not get there the easy way."⁵

⁴ As told by Joanna Adams, Day1, March 20, 2005, http://day1.org/930-a_beautiful_mind

⁵ Joanna Adams.

“Who is this?” asks the whole city of Jerusalem in Matthew 21:10. We began Lent five Sundays ago with Satan’s testing of Jesus’ identity as the beloved Son of God, and the question has stretched across this whole Lenten season.

Meda Stamper writes, “You cannot get the full picture until you face the cross, and on this last Sunday of Lent, we take our first steps with Jesus into Jerusalem, knowing that he will surely die, and they will make the tomb as secure as they can, and there will be again, year after year, the dreadful silence of Saturday. But we also know that the tomb cannot hold him forever. Easter Sunday will surely come. Again and again, in the Gospel and in our lives, Sunday will come. Just as the shadow of the cross rests on our celebration, the certainty of the resurrection stands sentinel in our sorrow and our grief.”⁶

⁶ Meda Stamper, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2011, p. 11.