

Holy Week, or Is It Holy Month? Matthew 21:1-17

Many church traditions have special services throughout 'Holy Week', beginning with Palm Sunday, through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. This year as a church, we cover the same distance, but stretch it over a month, rather than a week. This week we begin with Palm Sunday, so called because devotees laid out tree branches (though Scripture never says they were palm trees), in front of Jesus as he rode on a donkey on his final trip into the city of Jerusalem. The practice was typically used for processions of a king or victorious general. In treating Jesus this way, the crowd is expressing a fevered expectation that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem as Messiah, to overthrow the occupying Roman army and to liberate Israel, bringing political independence and religious liberty.

Day 1: Matthew 21:1-17 Overview of the passage

Perhaps the most striking feature of this particular passage is its intricate use of Scripture. Jesus engages in a rapid series of thrusts, parries, and repostes, all based on the Old Testament.

We are familiar with the basic outline of the events on Palm Sunday: Jesus sends his followers to borrow a donkey, Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the crowds lay palm branches on the road, Jesus drives money changers and sacrifice providers out of the temple. Yet it is an unusually dense passage, with multiple Old Testament quotes in quick succession, each capturing an underlying theological dispute between Jesus and his opponents. The first lesson is this: Jesus knew his Bible – and Luke expected his readers to know it as well – far, far better than we know ours.

Why are we prone to such biblical ignorance? In a recent article in the premier Christian magazine, *Christianity Today*, Darren Marks, a theology and Jewish studies professor at a Canadian university, bemoans the current biblical and theological illiteracy of the church and its leadership, and the neglect of systematic study of Scripture and theology in a favor of unreflective emotionalism and subjective inner experience. "For so many the starting point is not God but spiritual experience... The decreasing lack of interest in core Christian beliefs," he hypothesizes, "is due in part to church leaders who chase after relevance over substance—focusing on the *feeling* that something is meaningful rather than the *truth* that something is meaningful. It is also due to church members who imagine that their experience is the touchstone of truth about God, rather than learning to evaluate their experience in light of Scripture and theology."

The intricacy of Jesus' teaching in this passage should motivate us to place a greater priority on understanding Scripture, even when it requires effort, and even when it is not immediately and effortlessly, emotionally rewarding.

Day 2: Matthew 21:1-5 cf. Zechariah 9:9-11; 14:1-21 Reforming politics

Jesus' contemporaries awaited the day that the prophets – including Zechariah – had promised. A day when God himself would fight for Israel, when he would stand astride the Mount of Olives, splitting the earth before him, defeating her enemies, and sending a perpetual river of life-giving, prosperity-inducing water from Jerusalem throughout the land. A day when the one true God would rule the entire earth, and all nations would come to Jerusalem to worship.

Would Jesus be the long-awaited Messiah, promised in Zechariah 9? He deliberately conjures these associations when he stands on the Mount of Olives and sends his followers into town to obtain a donkey and its colt.

See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

According to Zechariah, this king would lead the battle against the enemies of Israel and of God, defeating all opponents.

¹⁰ *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.

But in what follows Jesus modifies those expectations, reinterpreting his role as king. He will not lead a rebellion against Rome, or a movement of national political liberation. Instead, he will lead a movement toward God.

We thank Christ that he is our king, not leading our country to military victory over terrorists or foreign armies, or into a time of national peace and prosperity, but leading us into freedom from Satan and from sin, winning the battle not through force of arms but through his atoning death on our behalf.

Day 3: Matthew 21:6-12; Psalm 118:26-27 Reforming religion

Jesus – and Luke – turn quickly from Zechariah to the Psalms, and from political and economic expectations to religious reformation.

As Jesus rides the donkey toward Jerusalem, the disciples and the crowds pave his way with their cloaks and with the branches of trees in the sort of triumphal procession. They recite the words of Psalm 118, a psalm traditionally chanted by pilgrims headed into Jerusalem for the Passover (as here):

²⁵ *O LORD, save us (= Hosanna!) ...*

²⁶ *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.*

Notably, Psalm 118 continues,

From the house of the LORD we bless you...

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.

Jesus is the king, Son of David, and the crowd praises and blesses him in the words of Psalm 118; they carry boughs in hand, and join the festal procession, but there's one major discrepancy: the procession does not go to the temple for a blessing, it

does not reach the altar. Instead, it ends with Jesus driving out the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals from the temple courtyard.

Jesus contemporaries expect him – in the pattern of Psalm 118 – to endorse their religious practices and to celebrate their devotion to God. Instead, he forcibly intervenes to reform their most sacred feast, Passover. We'll look more closely at his particular complaint against them tomorrow. For the moment it is sufficient to note that fervent devotion and passionate enthusiasm are insufficient to honor God; he requires more – or something different – from his worshippers.

Day 4: Matthew 21:12-13; Jeremiah 7:1-11 A house of prayer or of robbers?

Centuries earlier, Jeremiah had warned his contemporaries about their false security based on the temple. Jesus does not appear to be dealing with exactly the same problems as Jeremiah: at least, unlike Jeremiah, he does not accuse his contemporaries of oppressing the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or of shedding innocent blood, or of theft or murder, adultery or perjury or idolatry. Their sins are lesser, but no less serious: they distract the worship of God with the business of worship, with the sale of animals for sacrifice and the changing of money into the currency required for temple donations. A place of prayer has become a noisy market.

This text is a reminder to us that still today God intends the church as a place for his people to worship and pray, not predominately as a place to socialize with friends or to meet a future spouse, or as an entertainment complex with motivational talks, video presentations, and coffee bar, or as a hangout for youth to get away from their parents or a daycare center for parents to escape their children. Many of these are legitimate subordinate functions – just as are purchasing animal sacrifices and changing currency for donations to the temple – but they must not be allowed to impinge on the primary functions of church.

Day 5: Matthew 21:14; 2 Samuel 5:6-8 A place for the blind and the lame

Yet again Jesus – and Matthew – highlight the religious reformation he brings, by welcoming blind and lame into the temple, and healing them. Those who see cry out, 'Hosanna to the Son of David.' But at this point Jesus demonstrates himself to be superior to his forefather David.

When ancient king David first went to war against his future capital city of Jerusalem, its inhabitants did not think him to be a serious threat. Instead, they mocked him: "You are such a wimp, even our blind and lame can keep you out of our city" (2 Sam 5:6-7). David turned the insult back on them, "[To capture the city, we] have to use the water shaft to reach those 'lame and blind' who are my enemies" (2 Sam 5:8a). After David's capture of Jerusalem, this adage became his mantra, excluding the blind and lame from the palace: "That is why they say, 'The blind and lame' will not enter the place" (2 Sam 5:8b).

Those days are over, Jesus insists. The blind and lame are welcome, not only into the palace of the king, but into the temple of God. And not just the blind and lame, but all who suffer from any real or perceived inadequacy, deficiency, defect, or disqualification. Jesus throws open wide the doors not just to the temple, but to the presence of God.

Day 6: Matthew 21:15-16; Psalm 8:2 From the lips of children and infants

Jewish leaders took exception to one more feature of these proceedings. Instead of celebrating Jesus' healing of the blind and lame, they complain that he allows naive children to honor him as Messiah: "Hosanna to the Son of David," the children cry out.

Jesus again responds to their objection with Scripture: "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (Ps 8:2a). Jesus stops here, but Psalm 8 does not, and Jesus likely intends to imply what comes next: "because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger" (Ps 8:2b).

The children praise God (or Jesus) to silence the enemies of God (the chief priests and the teachers of the law). At the end of this lengthy discourse, Jesus turns back to the capital city and its leaders: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate [predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army in 70 AD]. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt 23:37-39)."

It is difficult for us to appreciate the extraordinary boldness – his contemporaries would have said, the treasonable arrogance – of Jesus' words. His claim to be Messiah, a modern King David, ruler of the nation, was incredible enough. But that is a small thing compared to his rejection of temple worship and leadership, his healing of the blind and lame, his warning that the city and temple of God were slated for destruction, and his insistence that all – even the most prestigious religious leaders – must acknowledge the truth of his claims.

Recent surveys indicate that increasingly today, younger generations of Christian believers are falling prey to pluralism and the relativism that it engenders, supposing that other religions provide paths to God, that sincere worshippers can find him through means other than hearing the gospel and believing in Jesus. Yet Jesus' words to his contemporaries apply no less today: he provides the only access to God; the only ones who can come to God are those who say of him, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' If this was true even for Judaism, which owes its origin to the revelation of God to Abraham and Moses, how much more is it true of other religions today.