

Palm Sunday A  
Matthew 21:1-11  
April 2, 2023

*Person of Interest*  
Rev. Brandon S. Perrine

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>“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.” <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>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!” <sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

~o~

A married couple had quarreled. It had been a pitched battle of wills, each digging heels in to preserve the position they had so vehemently taken. Emotions had run high. As they were driving to attend a family wedding in a distant city, both were nursing hurt feelings in defensive silence. The angry tension between them was so thick you could cut it with a knife. But then, the silence was broken. Pointing to a donkey standing in a

pasture out beside the road, one of them sarcastically asked, “Relative of yours?” The other quickly replied, “By marriage!”<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine the scene in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus riding into the city on a donkey with everyone watching, everyone wondering? We read that “when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’ The *whole* city, really? *Everyone* asking, “Who is this?” Could Matthew’s author have been exaggerating a bit, I wonder? After all, there was another parade in Jerusalem that day, the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate was coming to town. I bet he was riding a magnificent war horse, its mane blowing majestically in the wind. I bet there were banners. I bet there were trumpets. Maybe there were even flower petals raining down on Pilate and the throng of impressive centurions that accompanied him as he entered the city to keep the peace during the notoriously unsettling time of Passover. Surely people would want to watch that instead. I bet Pilate waved to the crowds.

Jesus came in the back gate, riding on a donkey, accompanied by fishers and peasants, ordinary Joes and plane Janes. They laid coats and palm branches in the road and shouted Hosanna, which means “Save us!” I bet Jesus didn’t even wave. Why would anyone come to this parade? Let’s imagine together...

Maybe the crowd came to see another miracle. They’d seen Jesus heal the lame and sick and open the eyes of the blind. They had tasted the loaves and fishes on that hillside when he fed some 20,000 of them. Perhaps some of them had even seen him call a dead guy forth from his tomb. Maybe they wanted another trick. I bet he could’ve pulled a rabbit out of his sleeve and they would’ve been happy. But he didn’t.

Maybe the Pharisees and teachers came to see him mess up again. With Rome occupying the country and bringing new laws, new festivals and celebrations, new rituals and a new religion, they may have been worried

---

<sup>1</sup> Fr. Anthony Kadavil. “Palm Sunday C: Jokes of the Week,” Sundayprep.org, April 3, 2022: <https://sundayprep.org/fr-tonys-homily-for-palm-sunday-year-c/>.

that their whole culture would gradually disappear and Jesus wasn't helping things. He blatantly disregarded their customs and rituals – not washing his hands before meals, breaking the Sabbath, empowering women, touching unclean people, and challenging the teachers on everything. Maybe they just wanted to see him slip up and fall down. But he didn't.

Maybe the radicals came to see Jesus stir up trouble for Rome. After all, they were waiting for someone to lead them in battle against the occupiers – to lead the resistance. They had already tried insurrection, but it didn't work. Rome stayed. But it was Passover. People remembered the suffering and oppression their ancestors had endured in Egypt. It was the perfect time for a coup. Maybe they just wanted to see him thumb his nose at one of the Romans guarding the gate. But he didn't.

Maybe the disciples came to see Jesus finally get some recognition. They'd been following him for three years and they were tired of waiting around. This guy was the big kahuna, he was the real deal, and they knew it! They'd seen what he could do. They'd heard him teach. They'd felt his power and they'd felt his peace. It was high time he was recognized for who and what he was – the Christ. Maybe they just wanted to be there when he finally admitted it to the masses. But he didn't.

The crowd expected Jesus to be a magician, the Pharisees and teachers expected Jesus to be a failure, the radicals expected Jesus to be a war hero, and the disciples expected Jesus to be recognized – to be known for exactly who they believed him to be. Matthew's author may have been exaggerating when they wrote that the whole city was in turmoil, but I imagine that at least some people were asking "Who is this?" The truth is, the author wasn't really trying to communicate what the people in Jerusalem were thinking, or feeling, or asking. The author is leading us. At this point in the gospel, the author wants us, the readers, to be asking this very question: "Who is this Jesus?" As the story unfolds in the week ahead, the author's answer to the question will become clear. Today, however, we are invited to sit with the question: "Who is this Jesus?"

Facing the Holy Week ahead and the tenderness, tense expectation, and final betrayal of Maundy Thursday; the sorrowful abandonment of Good Friday; and the empty silence of Holy Saturday, the answer we arrive at is not inconsequential. Who is this Jesus? It is the question that every Christian must at some point face. Depending on how we answer it, we may walk away from this Palm Sunday disappointed, like the crowd, or the Pharisees, or the radicals, or even the disciples, because the one we'd come to see never actually showed up. Or, you may follow Jesus into the candlelight of the last supper, through the shadows of the garden, into the torchlight of the trial, into the utter darkness of the crucifixion, into the silence of the tomb, and into the bright light of a victorious Easter morn to find the Jesus you'd expected all along. "Who is this Jesus?" The author is asking us. What will we say? Amen.