

# Towards Jerusalem and the Temple

## The Triumphal Entry

Matthew 21.1–11; Mark 11.1–10; Luke 19.29–40;  
John 12.12–17

The account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem marks the moment when his death begins to look inevitable and unavoidable. Although the shadow of the cross has fallen over Jesus' life and ministry for many chapters, his entry into Jerusalem is the moment when the focus shifts significantly and we, the readers, become aware that what follows will involve us in accompanying Jesus to death and beyond.

**Mark 11.1–10** When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' <sup>4</sup>They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

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<sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! <sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

The popularly used title 'the triumphal entry' for this event is an intriguing one. As soon as you start thinking about it, it becomes clear that 'triumphal entry' can only be applied in the most ironic of senses to what happens to Jesus on his way into Jerusalem. Jesus is not triumphant at this point. His ministry is not complete. He has achieved only the most superficial recognition by the crowds and even his own disciples do not fully understand who he is. Even John's Gospel, which regards Jesus' death as his moment of glory, could not claim triumph as his death has not yet taken place.

So this is not in any usual sense a triumphal entry. It is an 'anti-triumph', or a triumph subverted. It is a triumph of the true nature of God: a nature that eschews pomp and splendour, a nature that acts out of love rather than status, and faithfulness rather than superficial gain. It is no surprise, therefore, that we cling to this title to describe this event, and rightly so, since it points us towards a subtle answer to the question, 'Why did Jesus die?' He died because God's understanding of what makes for a triumph is light years away from our own.

### **The prearrangement of the loan of a donkey**

The account of the disciples going ahead to borrow a donkey is an intriguing one. It seems an unnecessary detail to insert and yet Matthew, Mark and Luke all include it. Only John resorts to saying that Jesus 'found' a donkey without exploring how or where he found it. One thing that this brief little snippet does for us is to remind us how little, in fact, we know of Jesus and his life. The implication of this story is that the donkey belongs to someone whom Jesus knows and with whom he has prearranged a loan of the donkey for the occasion. Who this person was, exactly how they knew Jesus or even how Jesus made such a prior arrangement, is lost in the mists of time.

### *What did Jesus' actions imply?*

One of the questions that the triumphal entry raises is how much of the symbolic resonance of what was going on would have been picked up by the people at the time; the disciples then or afterwards; the first hearers of the stories; the Gospel writers and even the Gospel writers' audience. This passage is rich with symbolism and suggested meaning, but it is hard to know how much of this would have been recognized at the time, how much would have been suggested later by the way in which the tellers and writers of the story recounted the events, and how much has been read into the narrative by later interpreters. Nevertheless, it is worth taking time to stop and explore some of the richness implied in the text.

It is clear, when Jesus began to ride rather than walk, that something important was taking place. Perhaps this gives us something of a clue as to why Matthew, Mark and Luke all include the little story about the prearrangement of a loan of a donkey. This was a conscious, deliberate act, not an accidental one.

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### **One donkey or two?**

One of my favourite little moments of this story comes from Matthew's Gospel, where the disciples are sent to bring not one donkey but two: a mother and her foal:

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. (21.6–7)

It is a moment where you can't help wondering what image was in Matthew's mind as he wrote. The reference to the donkey and the colt comes from Zechariah 9.9 (see below) which mentions both. Matthew's concern to show that this passage is being fulfilled here is so great that he includes both. It is much more likely that what was going on in Zechariah was Hebrew parallelism, where the same idea was repeated in a slightly different form for emphasis, but Matthew has taken it literally and included both animals in his narrative.

What he describes is hard to imagine. Does Jesus sit on both at once, or one after the other? The answer is probably that Matthew didn't picture anything; his concern was more to demonstrate the clear connection with Zechariah 9.9. Nevertheless, the odd notion of Jesus straddling two donkeys on his way into Jerusalem never fails to make me smile.

At this stage in his journey, the road to Jerusalem would have been thronged with people. Passover was a feast of obligation and so everyone in the country would, if at all possible, have converged in Jerusalem for the feast. This would have meant hundreds of thousands of people coming to the city. Many of these would have travelled together and friendships would have formed along the way. As a result, it would be possible to surmise that Jesus, tired from the long walk, had simply and coincidentally got on any old donkey belonging to one of the members of the crowd who were travelling that route together. But the explicit recount-

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ing of a specific journey made to collect a donkey for Jesus to ride removes any doubt in the matter. Jesus' riding of a donkey was no accidental, spur of the moment coincidence. It was deliberate and pre-planned. It is clear we are intended to read something into it, but what did it symbolize?

It is widely known that victorious Roman generals, when returning to Rome, would ride a white horse in their 'triumph'. A triumph was a carefully planned procession to show the people back in Rome what a great and marvellous general they were. In the procession they would bring all the loot (the treasures and the slaves) that they had purloined as a result of the victory and by doing so demonstrate how triumphant they were. If the notion of a Roman triumphal procession lies behind Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, it is clearly and importantly a subversion of this kind of event. The mode of transport is a donkey not a white horse; the people in the procession all came willingly and were not coerced; Jesus' triumph is yet to come and is in any case (as above) the kind of triumph only God would think triumphant.

So the narrative may bring to mind a Roman triumph, but much closer literary links can be found in Jewish tradition.

**1 Maccabees 13.51** On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

One very striking passage from Maccabees recounts the victorious procession of the Maccabean army into Jerusalem after they had conquered Jerusalem in the Maccabean war against the Syrian Greek (Seleucid) Empire. Particularly striking here is the reference to the Maccabees being accompanied with praise and palm branches as Jesus also was. While the same objection applies to this as to the Roman triumph – that Jesus was not yet victorious – here it is possible that the actions of those accompanying Jesus

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into Jerusalem were intentional and hopeful. It could be that the crowd had this event from Maccabees in mind as they journeyed into Jerusalem and saw Jesus as a new Simon Maccabaeus come to drive a new occupying army out of their city.

Alongside this passage is also Zechariah, and if we connect the Maccabees with parts of Zechariah then Messianic bells begin to ring. There is, of course, Zechariah 9.9, which reminds us of the combined identity of the future king as both victorious and humble.

**Zechariah 9.9** Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter 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 donkey.

This connection may also have resonances of 1 Kings 1.33 which described Solomon's journey to his coronation riding on a mule. But as well as this there is also Zechariah 14.4 which identifies the Mount of Olives as the place where the Lord will stand to begin the redemption of Israel.

**Zechariah 14.4** On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley ...

All of this implies that in Jesus' deliberate mounting of a donkey on the Mount of Olives were enough clues to suggest to the crowd that he was the longed-for king-like figure who had come to redeem his people, and that they responded by hailing him as the crowd had done to Simon Maccabaeus only 150 or so years before. It's intriguing to ask what happened to the crowd following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; they appear simply to melt away as the narrative turns once more to Jesus and his followers, but

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why? What was it that so gripped their attention one minute and so entirely slipped from their minds the next? What is likely is that when Jesus did nothing more dramatic, more pressing needs (finding somewhere to stay, locating family members, and so on) took over and their adulation of Jesus took second place in their minds.

*Cry ‘Hosanna’*

For many people it comes as quite a surprise to discover that the word ‘Hosanna’ comes, in English, only here in the Bible; though in Hebrew it appears here and in Psalm 118.25. ‘Hosanna’ is so widely used in worship songs and in hymns that it is easy to assume that it is dotted throughout the psalms with as much abandon as the word ‘Hallelujah’. It is not, and in English translations is found only in Matthew, Mark and John’s versions of this account. Luke, as he does elsewhere, removes the need for including Hebrew words by omitting the phrase.

| <b>Matthew 21.9</b>   | <b>Mark 11.9-10</b>  | <b>Luke 19.38</b>  | <b>John 12.13</b>   |
|---|--|--|---|
| ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ | ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! <sup>10</sup> Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ | ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ | ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!’ |

If we compare this to its original form in Psalm 118.25–26, some interesting points emerge.

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**Psalm 118.25–26** Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! <sup>26</sup>Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The first and most obvious point is that ‘Hosanna’ is not present in the English translation of the psalm. This is for a good reason. It is a Hebrew word and all other Hebrew words in the Old Testament are translated, so this was as well. In the Gospels, however, the Hebrew word is inserted into the middle of sentences that are otherwise all in Greek and so, to draw readers’ attention to this, the English translators of the text have kept it in its original Hebrew. This, of course, raises the question of why the Gospel writers kept one word from Psalm 118.25–26 in Hebrew and translated the rest. The answer seems to be that the word ‘Hosanna’ had become important in its own right (see the reference to shouting ‘Hosanna’ at the Feast of the Tabernacles in the text box below), and therefore its use here is of more importance than simply quoting the psalms in Hebrew.

### **Cloaks**

The closest parallel to spreading cloaks on the ground can be found in 2 Kings 9.13, when, after Jehu was anointed with oil, the crowd spread their cloaks on the ground and hailed him as king.

### **Leafy branches**

Some scholars have drawn a connection between this event and the Feast of the Tabernacles. At that feast it was customary to wave palm branches whenever the word ‘Hosanna’ from Psalm 118.25 was mentioned. This connection is unlikely, given the importance of these events being clustered around Passover but the resonances are, nevertheless, very interesting and have led some scholars to question whether the entry into Jerusalem

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really took place during Tabernacles not Passover (a view that unsurprisingly has not received overwhelming support).

It is also interesting to notice the subtle shifting of meaning in the word from its original usage, to its use in the Gospels and then to its common usage today. *Hoshi'a na* means literally 'save now', and in its context in Psalm 118 is a cry of supplication by the whole people of God that God would hear them and save them. The word's usage in the Gospels suggests that this has shifted from being simply a prayer to something closer to a statement of confidence. In much modern use it has become such a statement of confidence that in some contexts it feels like a cry of praise akin to Hallelujah.

This shift in meaning can probably be ascribed to the popularity of Psalm 118 around the time of Jesus as a psalm expressing the future hope of Israel's coming salvation by a future Davidic king-like figure. In Rabbinic literature (for example, *Babylonian Talmud Pesachim* 119a), Psalm 118.25ff was used with particular reference to such a figure who would come to redeem Israel, so this might lie in the background of its use here.

It is also worth noting that none of the quotations in the Gospels is exact. Matthew and Mark double the use of 'Hosanna' and also insert an overt Davidic reference which is only at best implicit in Psalm 118. Luke's insertion is particularly interesting as it echoes the song of the angels in Luke 2.14.

**Luke 19.38** 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

The key difference, though, is that in Luke 2.14 peace is said to be on earth whereas here peace is only in heaven. The crowds mimicking of the song of the angels makes them in Luke's Gospel proclaimers, like the angels, of the in-breaking of God's kingdom on earth. However we are now at the stage in Luke's narrative where

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time and time again he stresses the future catastrophic fate that the people have set for themselves, from which the only conclusion can be that peace is not to be found on earth, at least not yet.

The challenge of the chanting of Psalm 118 is that although it was particularly associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles, it was more generally associated, along with all the other Hallel psalms in 113–118, as a psalm of ascent, or a psalm sung on the way to a major festival in Jerusalem. The question that lingers then is how much significance we should place on its being sung here, if it would have been sung anyway. The answer seems to be that significance is to be found not in any one thing but in the confluence of events: Jesus suddenly and deliberately riding a donkey, this taking place on the Mount of Olives, the spreading of the cloaks to welcome a king and the singing of a well-loved psalm that looked forward to a king-figure like David coming to redeem Israel. This confluence of events is so deeply and richly suggestive of meaning to someone living in the first century that it is no wonder that the people around Jesus began to draw conclusions about who Jesus was – even if these conclusions did not cause them to continue following him after his entry into Jerusalem.

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### **Reflection**

The events that took place on what we now call Palm Sunday all raise the question of what it is that makes or helps us to recognize who Jesus really is. On that day Jesus was the same person that he had been for the rest of his ministry. So what was it that made the crowd begin to recognize and proclaim his Messianic significance? The donkey on the Mount of Olives might have been enough but I can't help wondering whether, as I suggest above, that it was the bringing together of a number of strands that began to make the penny drop. Could it be that the singing of Psalm 118, as was customary on the way to a major festival, while Jesus was on a donkey, on the Mount of Olives, on the way into Jerusalem, brought Jesus' identity into focus in a new way?

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Having said that, we must not make too much of this new realization: Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and the crowd melted away. The human attention span is very poor indeed. Often today we blame the speed of our society, technology in general and mobile phones in particular for shortening our attention span, but the Gospel narratives suggest it was ever thus. Even at a time when there were few external factors to distract, the arrival into Jerusalem, the need to find somewhere to stay and something to eat seems to have been sufficient to pull people away from their dawning realization that the one they had accompanied into Jerusalem waving palms and with shouts of 'Hosanna' might just have been the one for whom they had waited for so long. The Gospel writers give little explanation about why the crowd disappeared and perhaps this is simply because it needed little explanation. Even when faced with the most important news of all, it is far too easy to be distracted and for our attention to fade.

All of this is important to bear in mind as we seek to live out our Christian life. Why is it that sometimes we put our heart and soul into explaining the mysteries of Christian truth, or of proclaiming Jesus, and people simply do not grasp what we are talking about? The answer may be that the recognition of truth requires more than one factor and that we need to keep on speaking, proclaiming and acting in the hope that one day the right confluence of factors will help people to grasp what we are talking about. It may also be that action rich with meaning (like Jesus' riding a donkey on the Mount of Olives) can speak far more loudly than words, and perhaps we need to pay as much attention to what we do and how we do it as to what we say.

Alongside this we need to recognize that all human nature is fickle, and that we cannot always process or stay with a dawning realization of truth. If the crowd could not even linger in Jerusalem with Jesus for a day or two after shouting 'Hosanna' and waving palms no wonder we also struggle to stay with and live out our recognition of who Jesus really is when we encounter him in our lives. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't try but it does offer us a level of forgiveness when we fail.