

## April 17, 2011 Palm Sunday Matthew 21:1-11

By Pastor Jon Diebler

I assume when you heard the gospel reading that your brain glossed over one big but strange detail in the text from the gospel of Matthew. In your head you imagined Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey with crowds of people lining the road on either side spreading their coats and leafy tree branches on the road for him to pass over. The crowds were cheering him on and singing his praises as he went by.

If this is what you imagined then you're like most people. And you've completely overlooked the fact that the text says Jesus rode *two* donkeys into Jerusalem – not just one. Listen to the text again. In verse 2 Jesus says, “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.” And in verse 6 we read, “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*.”

In seminary we had a lot of fun with this. We joked about it being a circus act with Jesus jumping back and forth between the donkey and its colt. Or we said this was proof that Jesus was exceptionally bowlegged and that he had to have two animals to be wide enough to accommodate him. One of the professors called it “Cowboy Jesus” as he rode both animals.

What is really going on here? First, it is worth noting that the other gospels – Mark, Luke, and John – all say Jesus rode just one donkey. Matthew is the exception here. Did he believe Jesus literally rode two animals that day? That's hard to answer, but it is safe to say that Matthew is both emphasizing fulfillment of scripture and playing around with words; to nudge us to recognize the irony of other words that will be said a few verses later.

Matthew gets the idea of two donkeys from the prophesy he is quoting, Zechariah 14:4 which says, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The prophesy is intended to say that the promised one will not arrive like a king on a mighty war horse, but in a humble and meek way on a donkey.

Now Matthew knew the principles of Hebrew poetry, and he certainly has to have understood that Zechariah was using ‘poetic parallelism’ in his prophesy. When Zechariah made his prophesy he didn't intend to say that Jesus would arrive on two donkeys. But Matthew was also sees Scripture from trained rabbinic and scribal eyes, in which every detail is important. And so to emphasize the complete fulfillment of Scripture, he has the disciples fetch two animals and has Jesus ride on both of them.

The way he takes these words from Zechariah literally sets the stage to challenge the literal words the crowds will be saying as Jesus rides into town. What do the crowds say? “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

We said those words too as we began worship today. But do you know what they mean; especially the word Hosanna? Hosanna is a word we say and we think we know what it means, but we probably don't; just like the crowds who welcomed Jesus that day.

We say lots of words that we don't really mean. When we meet someone we'll often say, "Hi, how are you?" But do we really mean it? What do you usually say when someone asks how you're doing? Quite often it's something like, "Fine. How are you?" Or we reply with "How are you?" We only really mean it if it is someone we know. Then they will be honest enough to say, "My back's hurting today." Or, "I can't get rid of this cold," or something like that.

One time I was at a gas station pumping gas and someone pulled up to the other side of the pump. I had never met the man before and when he got out I said in a typical friendly tone, "How are you?" And he started listing off all his aches and pains. And I thought, "I was just being friendly when I said, 'How are you?' I didn't really mean it!"

I think that's what the crowd was like when they were welcoming Jesus with hosannas. What does hosanna really mean? It is a transliteration of two Hebrew words which mean, "Help now, we pray!" Or, "Save now, we pray!" It is from Psalm 118:25 which is a plea to God for help.

But that isn't what the crowds really meant when they called out to Jesus with "hosanna". In the first century it had become a largely meaningless shout of joy; as meaningless as "How are you?" is for us.

Ironically of course the crowds were right. They were crying out to the right person for salvation even as they didn't know it. And that is an irony in the words that Matthew definitely wants us to get.

Who was this person the crowds were unknowingly calling out to for salvation? And why would they be crying out for his execution in just a few short days? The truth is they didn't really know who he was or what he was up to. And when they did see they didn't like it.

Some certainly believed he was, or should be, an armed military messiah. They would be "free" they thought if this Jesus guy would overthrow their Roman oppressors. Remember, Passover is the celebration all these pilgrims have gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate and Passover was a celebration of independence from slavery to Egypt. Many people today still look to Jesus to be some sort of power-filled messiah who will help them to: win a war, fight their agenda, or if nothing else divinely beat up on the bad guys of the world who manage to escape the world's justice systems.

On that day some believed him to be a prophet. The crowds even say in verse 11, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Here they weren't exactly wrong, but they weren't right either. The view of Jesus has always been popular, and remains highly popular today too. That Jesus was a good man and a great teacher, perhaps even the best and greatest man and teacher ever. He is a great example to live by; but he is not 'Savior'. It is one thing to call Jesus a great guy. It is on an entirely different level to call him 'Savior'. To call him Savior one must

first admit that one needs to be saved and that one does not have the power to do it. Our world teaches us that we have to trust to our own wisdom and skill – not someone else's.

To call Jesus “prophet” or “great teacher” isn't technically wrong, but it is so far from the truth that you've completely missed the point.

Some people simply ignored Jesus that day.

Some people simply joined in the crowd to see what the excitement was about.

Though they called out “Save us!” few saw Jesus that day as God coming to bring them that salvation.

In the original version of the Interpreter's Bible Commentary it notes, “In the crowd on the first Palm Sunday were represented all the half-beliefs about Christ that mark our own day.” (Volume 7, pg. 503)

Who was this man (somehow riding two donkeys) being heralded by crowds who didn't really know what they were saying? We have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story. We know how it ends, but we still do have the same question. Who is this man?

Military leader?

Prophet?

A good man?

Someone not really all that important?

A bit of entertainment like a parade?

Or Savior to whom you cry out like a broken and helpless beggar truthfully and fully saying, “Hosanna; Help, save me, I pray. You who enters on a donkey, who will be dead by Friday, I need you because it is the only hope I have.”

Amen