

Scripture for Palm Sunday 2020

Zechariah 9:10-11

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

*See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 21:1-11

²¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ "*Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*"¹

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*"² "*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" ¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

¹ Zech 9:9.

² Ps 118:25-26.

Sermon: The Faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah

In the very first verse of Matthew's Gospel, he tells us - his readers - *who* Jesus is: he's the Messiah, the son of David.³ The title "Messiah" refers to the long-expected *saviour* that the Old Testament prophets proclaimed would rescue Israel from external oppression and put the world to right. This title was also linked with that of "Son of David," which is a *royal* title and indicates that Jesus was to be Israel's *King*.⁴ Later, in the temptations in the wilderness, Matthew tells us the devil tempted Jesus to ascertain what *kind* of Messiah or king he would be.⁵ In the last of those three temptations, Jesus was offered prestige and power – to rule the whole world – if he would simply bow down and worship the devil. You'll recall Jesus rejected that temptation, saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."⁶ In today's reading, Messiah Jesus is now approaching Jerusalem – the center of regional power - by a route that includes the Mount of Olives.⁷ What would be the reaction?

Before we join the crowds⁸ and enter Jerusalem with Jesus, I want to pause and remind you that on *three* earlier occasions Matthew tells us that "Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the Jewish leaders, and that he must be killed and, on the third day, be raised to life."⁹ On the last occasion, he provides more detail: The Jewish establishment would condemn him to death and they would hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, flogged, and then crucified. In the context of this expectation, and having been reminded what *kind* of Messiah Jesus would be, Jesus then says, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, just as I myself did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many."¹⁰ I don't think we should interpret this as Jesus having a "death wish"! Rather, he had a very strong sense of his *vocation*. And he knew his history too; prophets and would-be Messiah figures often ended up being killed in Jerusalem.¹¹ Nevertheless, as he looked over Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, seeing the magnificent Temple Mount in the distance, he *continued* on toward Jerusalem

³ Matt 1:1; Jesus is also called a "Son of Abraham." We are also told that Jesus is so named "because he will *save* his people from their sins" – 1:21, (after Joshua, which means: "the LORD saves"). A little further on he is referred to as Immanuel, which means "God is with us" (Matt 1:23 – citing Isa 7:14) and "Messiah" means "God's Chosen One." Jesus is also referred to the "Son of Man," an apocalyptic title, (see, for example: Matt 8:20; 12:8; 18:11; 20:18.)

⁴ See Matt 2:2-6. Bethlehem is David' city (hence 'son of David) and we are also told a ruler the Messiah would be "a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" – 2:6, citing Micah 5:2,4.

⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Temptation-of-Jesus.pdf> .

⁶ Deut. 6: 4-5,13; Matt 4:10. (See also Matt 22:36-38).

⁷ Matt 21:1 – in Matthew's account, this is the *first* time Jesus had been there. (Only Luke tells us of the boy Jesus' visits to the Temple, Luke 2:22-52.) The mention of the Mount of Olives is significant, it was the traditional place from which the Messiah was to return; see Zech 14:1–11 - especially v4,9. This serves to *underline* Matthew's point in 1:1.

Zechariah 14:1 – 11

⁸ At Passover time, Jerusalem and the whole surrounding neighbourhood was crowded with pilgrims. The "crowds" in Matthew function as disciples *en masse* – see Matt 4:25; 7:28–29; 13:2; 9:8,33; 12:15,23; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2.

⁹ See Matt 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19. See also 26:1-4 for a 4th reference. The word "must" perhaps indicates a divine plan (see also 1:22-23; 26:54); Matthew stresses the fulfilment of OT prophecy throughout his gospel; see also Isa 52-53.

¹⁰ Matt 20:26-28; Jesus referred to himself here as "Son of Man" – see [3]. (I omit this detail for simplicity.)

¹¹ See Matt 23:37. Matthew presents Jesus as someone he knew *who* he was: Matt 16:13-17.

anyway. Regardless of his private fears, which we hear about later in Gethsemane,¹² Jesus is *faithful* to his messianic calling, one that was proclaimed with the voice from heaven at his baptism.¹³ I will come back to this aspect later.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey; he comes in humility and peace – not on a warhorse. This *act* was deliberate, coming on a donkey will awaken in people’s minds the story of the prophets. As we heard in the reading from Zechariah, the rider is a *king* who will proclaim peace to the nations.¹⁴ This connection only fueled the Jewish expectation of a messianic deliverer at this time of Roman occupation. In a sense, this so-called “triumphal entry” is one that parodies the typical entrance of victorious kings and their armies. As I mentioned earlier, the one who has arrived comes to *serve*, but that doesn’t make him any less a King. Gentleness, mercy, and compassion are the marks of God’s domain. Jesus is *redefining* what “Messiah” means both here and throughout his ministry, but his followers only recognise this later with hindsight. Incidentally, a close look at Matthew’s description makes it sound like Jesus is riding *two* donkeys at once!¹⁵ This confusing double emphasis is likely misuse of Old Testament Hebrew poetry which, like a good teacher, usually repeats each clause twice as a matter of form! But Matthew’s key point here is Jesus is the *fulfilment* of Scripture.

The *behaviour* of Jesus’ many followers show that they are publicly proclaiming his kingship. They spread their cloaks on the path, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.¹⁶ Similar acts of loyalty and respect took place in the past when kings or military victors approached Jerusalem’s gates.¹⁷ The acclamations they use come from Psalm 118, the words I said at the beginning of this service.¹⁸ This was the song that pilgrims *always* sang on the way to Jerusalem for Passover, a song of victory and praise to God, the one who defeats all their enemies and establishes his kingdom. Matthew makes the kingly connection explicit with the added, “Hosanna to the *Son of David!*” And note that the word “Hosanna” was originally a prayer that means, “Save us, we beseech you,” but it also can mean the same thing as “hurrah,” and that is likely the meaning here.

Taken all together, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is an unmistakable and provocative political act that proclaims Jesus is the rightful king. Jesus, the itinerant prophet from the countryside, comes at long last to this center of power. This is not merely a challenge to Israel’s *spiritual* leaders, but a *political*

¹² See Matt 26:36-46, especially 37-38.

¹³ Matt 3:13-17. The proclamation from heaven connects with Ps 2:7-9, a *royal* psalm appropriate for a king’s coronation. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/The-Baptism-of-Jesus.pdf> .

¹⁴ Zech 9:10-11. Note Matthew edits the text, omitting “righteous and victorious,” and replaces “lowly” with “gentle.” There is also an implied (Greek) link to Isa 62:11 LXX which says, “For behold, the Lord has made it heard to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, ‘behold *your saviour has come to you*, having his reward and his work before his face.’” This draws a connection with Jesus as *saviour of the world*. [Note: “daughter Zion” means the inhabitants of Jerusalem.] See also Mal 3:1.

¹⁵ A mother and her colt – see Matt 21:7.

¹⁶ Matt 21:8.

¹⁷ See 1 Kings 1:32–40; 2 Kings 9:13; 1 Macc 13:51; 2 Macc 10:7. [Note: Matthew does not mention *palm* branches.]

¹⁸ Ps 118:25-26. See also Matt 23:39 (and 24:3); this probably alludes to Christ’s future coming a judge.

challenge as well because government and religion *were* combined at that time – whether you were Jewish or Roman.¹⁹ Messiah Jesus was therefore a threat to the powerful status quo; no wonder the whole city was in *uproar*.²⁰ This was an explosive mix; what would happen next?

I encourage you to explore Matthew 21-26 over the next few days, or read the daily lectionary passages listed on the Church website. In brief, Matthew presents the public conflict between Jesus and the money-changers in the temple precinct and, later, the toe-to-toe verbal challenges from the religious leaders who question Jesus' authority for doing what he does. Jesus continued to performed miracles and tell pertinent parables; it is both a tense and an intense time. However enthusiastic the crowd is on "Palm Sunday," there is no mistaking this is a hostile city. Jesus knew before he entered Jerusalem that this was not going to end well, yet he continued to be *faithful* to his calling. As Paul says in Galatians, "We are saved – or made right with God - by the *faithfulness* of Messiah Jesus."²¹ Instead of the Jewish elite acknowledging Jesus as God's Chosen One, he was to later to experience a different kind of enthronement, that of being publicly "lifted up" before the crowds on a cross. We will obviously address that further on Good Friday.

There are three things that came to my mind as I reflected on this scene. The first is the word "Hosanna," originally meaning, "Save us, we beseech you." Jesus will indeed save, or rescue, us but not in the way the Jews of the time expected; not with a military victory over their Roman enemies. People often turn to God when they want something very badly. Church attendance can go up when a major crisis strikes, whether that's a pandemic, a famine, a war, or whatever. Obviously, that's problematic with our present "stay-at-home" orders, but you get the point! Everyone is seeking answers the hard questions of life. And everybody wants Jesus to ride into the city and be the kind of King that *they* want him to be,²² the one who will magically fix our problems, heal us all, feed us, give us peace, etc. That was the kind of king the devil tempted Jesus to be and he rejected that option. Even so, I believe Jesus came into the world to respond to all these prayers. Thankfully, he doesn't wait until our motives are pure; he comes to us where we are, anxious and afraid. Jesus said he came "to seek and to save the lost,"²³ and there are a lot of lost people in this crisis because most of our fixed reference points have broken away from their moorings. It is certainly appropriate to bring all our prayers to Jesus, and I encourage you all to keep on doing just that but, having done so, we can't then go on to tell him what he *must* do to fix things! Just as Jesus is indeed God's Chosen One and, as we will see later in the events of Easter, he is also the Saviour of the World, even so, God will nevertheless surprise us in the way his rescue plan will be realised. God surprised everyone that first Easter, and his Spirit keeps on doing the unexpected ever since.

¹⁹ All that has changed between Jew and Roman is the 'god' you worship. Note: At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, the wise men visit King Herod at Christ's birth, asking "Where is the child born to be *king of the Jews*?" (Matt 2:2) and Herod is agitated. Near the Gospel's end, Jesus will be killed on the cross as, in Pilate's words, "*The King of the Jews*." (Matt 27:37.)

²⁰ Matt 21:10 NET, "stirred" (NIV) is a bit weak; NRSV has "turmoil."

²¹ Gal 2:16, 20; 3:22; Rom 3:22, 26; Phil 3:9 (NET, NTE); see also Gal 1:4.

²² Just like the cavalry that would ride into the fort at the last minute and save the day in the old Westerns!

²³ Matt 18:10 and Luke 19:10.

Second, although Jesus had his 12 disciples and adoring fans, they do not yet understand what Jesus is all about and so Jesus is essentially *on his own*.²⁴ He is leading from the front. He is *not* like a modern military general who works from home sending drones to do his killing. No, Jesus is there on the front line, alone, experiencing all the normal human emotions *and carrying on anyway*. Today, it is the health care workers who are on the front line, led by doctors who are just as vulnerable to this virus as anyone else. You may know some of them personally; I do too. They are committed to their vocation and some, sadly have already died to COVID-19, and many others have contracted the virus because of their work. They are understandably torn between their commitment to their calling, to their friends, colleagues, and teammates and their love of family; *but still go to work every day*. It is at such times we recall the words of Jesus: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick”²⁵ – and that was his response to those who criticized him for hanging out with those who were ill and healing them. During Easter week, Jesus also said to his followers: “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”²⁶ Some people have done this already in this crisis and their stories are already being told.²⁷ What is more remarkable is that some will have died *not* for their friends, but as a result of treating a stranger. Such stories of dedication, even self-less sacrifice, can help make more real to us the events of the original Palm Sunday and of Easter week.²⁸ For example, in various parts of the world, health workers have been cheered by the public from their balconies and front doorways at specific time and day, all inspired and organised by social media. This is right and proper for they are today’s heroes. This reminds me of the crowds cheering Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. I hope we do *not* repeat the acts of the fickle crowds on the first Good Friday by later blaming the medical profession for not doing enough when the death toll rises. That parallel aside, I believe the death of Jesus is much more that a human tragedy of a dedicated and misunderstood hero who was killed for a cause he believed in. Easter is *much* more important than that. In future sermons, I will be exploring the significance of those events to our big questions at this at this time of crisis.²⁹

Third, just as medical staff are demonstrating their faithfulness to their vocation, facing their fears daily yet still going to work, so Jesus was *faithful* to his messianic calling on Palm Sunday and went into Jerusalem knowing what would happen. It would be foolish to suggest he had no fear. We too are afraid and anxious – for we too are human. Even though the *vast majority* of us will live through this, we can’t know for sure if we, personally, will live or die, and we also don’t know if any of our friends or family members will die as a result of this virus. This uncertainty fuels our fears, along with many other factors. What are we to do? Here are four pieces of practical advice.

²⁴ Judas betrays Jesus because he did not live up to Judas’ expectations. Peter ultimately denies knowing Jesus out of fear; see Matt 26: 15-16, 31-35, 69-75.

²⁵ Matt 9:12.

²⁶ John 15:12-13.

²⁷ See, for example: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/priest-who-gave-up-ventilator-to-younger-patient-dies-of-coronavirus/ar-BB11COul> . There will be many more stories to be told once the dust settles down.

²⁸ See also Rom 5:6-8. (It is wise to read this through a *trinitarian* lens.)

²⁹ See also: Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants*, (Cascade, 2018).

First, remember the *mental battle* is just as important as the physical. Don't watch too much news on TV! Yes, get daily updates but too much will only stoke a sense of panic. The same goes for overdosing on social media and the internet. And only go to reliable sources for information - and don't spread misinformation or rumours! Use your time to do something creative and uplifting!

Second, the mental battle is hardest when we are alone. I am sure that is why Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane.³⁰ This is also why in our social isolation we need to remain connected by telephone, email, Facetime, Skype, Zoom or whatever. Hearing another voice can help bring perspective and calms the exaggerated fears that can take control of our minds. Remember fear does *not* come from God! Instead, one of the fruits of God's presence (Spirit) is *peace*.³¹

Third, just as Jesus knew his true identity or who he was in relation to God, know *who you are*. You and I are *beloved* children of our heavenly Father who demonstrated his own love for us through Jesus the Messiah. Remember, we have *priceless* value to God, something affirmed in our own baptism.³² Never forget that fact!

Finally, we have a further choice to make, to be *paralysed* by fear and uncertainty, or to have *faith*. We are people of faith after all, are we not? But we need to be careful to place our trust in God in the right context or on the right foundations. Our faith is *not* that we will be victorious because God will protect us all from all harm, but our faith is in the steadfast love of God who has promised to be present with us, by his living-giving Spirit, every step of the way, *regardless* of what happens. And faith in the faithfulness of Jesus who has walked this path before us and has demonstrated that even death itself is *not* the last word.³³

During Easter week, Jesus talked to his followers to calm their fears. He concluded in this way: "I have told you these things, so that *in me* you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."³⁴ Amen.

³⁰ Matt 26:36-46.

³¹ Gal 5:22-23. Others include: love joy, (peace), patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

³² Like for Jesus, our identity matters and enables us to live out our respective vocations or callings, great or small.

³³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/In-Whom-Do-We-Put-Our-Trust.pdf> .

³⁴ John 16:33.