

The Ruler We Didn't Ask For

Matthew 21:1-11

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Prayer: *Living God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our hearts to your Word. As we enter this Holy Week, grant us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

In the 1970 rock musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Jesus enters Jerusalem with the crowd shouting, “Hosanna! He sanna sanna hosanna hosanna! Hey, JC, JC, won’t you fight for me?”¹ (My wife’s favorite is “I don’t know how to love him. What to do, how to move him. I’ve been changed. Yes, really changed” I respond: You don’t have to know how—just love me.” On a more serious note, the crowd expects Jesus to be a warrior king—a strong leader who fights for the underdogs by overpowering force with even greater force. The musical—later made into a movie—is based on Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, the story we now celebrate as Palm Sunday.

But the musical and the Gospel reading both overlook a historical reality. There wasn’t just one parade that day; **there were two**. From the West came a different procession—a military machine marching from Caesarea. This was the entry of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate’s procession displayed all the pageantry of **imperial power**. Here’s a paraphrased reconstruction of it by scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan:

Imagine an imperial procession entering the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, golden eagles mounted on poles, the heavy rhythm of boots, drums. On the sidelines, a silent crowd watches with a mix of wonder and resentment.²

On the other hand, Jesus’ parade coming from the east is a peasant procession. Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives. The two processions could not have been more distinct; they were diametrically opposite in every respect. Jesus came from the peasant village of

¹Tim Rice, “Jesus Christ Superstar Soundtrack—Hosanna Lyrics,” <https://www...songlyrics.com/jesus-superstar-soundtrack.hosanna-lyrical/>

² A paraphrased version of Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan’s, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperCollins, 2006), 3.

Nazareth. His followers were also from the lower class. Jesus proclaimed the **kingdom of God**; Pilate displayed the power, glory, and violence of the **Roman Empire**. Crossan points out the contrast between two approaches to achieving peace. The Roman peace—the *Pax Romana*—was built on **conquest**. But Jesus offers **peace through justice**. One relies on imperial power; the other relies on humble service. One rules through fear; the other leads through love."

Yet, we must ask: which parade did the people actually want? The crowds have been following Jesus from the beginning—from Galilee to Judea (Matt. 4:25). They have been listening to his teaching. They are absolutely stunned by the authority in his voice (7:28-29). They are amazed at his healing miracles, casting out demons (9:33), and feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread and two fish. They begin to wonder whether Jesus might be the Son of David (12:23).

So it's not surprising that they are energized when Jesus rides into Jerusalem. It all starts at the Mount of Olives. That's significant because, according to the prophet Zechariah, that is exactly where the Messiah was expected to appear. (Zech. 14:1-11).

But their "Hosannas" carried a specific agenda. The word means "save us" or "deliver us." They wanted a conqueror on a stallion who would overthrow the Romans and **restore the kingdom of David**. "Save us," they cry out as they make a royal carpet of coats, cloaks, and tree branches for Jesus.

But Jesus rode **on a donkey**. His idea of leadership was very different. Most Bibles title our Gospel reading in Matthew "Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem." But let's be honest: there's **nothing particularly triumphant about it by first-century standards**. This was not a kingly parade to celebrate an actual victory of the Jewish people against the Roman occupiers.

So, why do we still call this the "Triumphal Entry"? It's because we're looking at it with the benefit of hindsight. We call it "triumphant" because we know how the story ends—**we're looking back** at Jesus' victory on the cross and **looking forward** to the day God finally sets everything right. It's a victory that started then, but is still unfolding now.

Right now, we live in the "in-between" time—Jesus has already won the victory over death, but the world hasn't fully seen the end of the story yet. Because of that, there's a real tension between how the world thinks and how God thinks.

Think about it: what does the world actually expect from a leader? Today, we expect our leaders to be adaptable, empathetic, and authentic. But let's be honest, the **old pillars of authority continue to influence us**. We know the usual list: Dominance. Control. Wealth. Prestige.

Maybe the reason the crowds who followed Jesus ultimately rejected him was simply that **he failed to meet their expectations**. They wanted a military king like David; they wanted someone to drive out the Romans with a sword. When it became clear that it wasn't his mission, those early shouts of "Hosanna" quickly turned into demands for his crucifixion. Even his own disciples abandoned him. It's a sobering reminder of the **fickleness of the human heart**.

But that contradiction is the **heart of the Gospel**. To understand his journey into Jerusalem—a city that was both his place of execution and exaltation—we need more than just logic. We need the **eyes of faith**.

The old hymn *Ride On! Ride On in Majesty* captures this mystery perfectly with the phrase "lowly pomp." Now, in the world's eyes, "lowly pomp" makes no sense—it's an oxymoron, total contradiction. In fact, the New Century Hymnal changed the word "pomp" to "colt," perhaps to highlight Jesus' humble leadership.

Yet this ancient conflict isn't just history—it's still playing out today. Our world loves a winner. It usually has no room for humility or meekness. You know the cynical saying: **"Nice guys finish last."** We've been conditioned to see humility as a weakness, and in a cutthroat world, we're told that being weak is a sure route to failure.

But for Jesus, humility isn't a weakness at all. It's the very way we lead.

Thankfully, there are still leaders **who challenge this status quo**. In 2015, the late **Pope Francis** visited Philadelphia. Much to the delight of the public, the pope chose to ride in a tiny Fiat rather than a fancy limousine. Like Jesus on his borrowed donkey, the pope demonstrated that humility and simplicity best suited his mission. Riding in the Fiat, he frequently

stepped out to talk to people or bless a child. He was seen, but he also saw; he was honored, but he also extended honor.

Think about it: whether it's a Savior on a donkey or a Pope in a compact car, they both flip the script on what we call "greatness." They challenge the status quo and force us to ask ourselves: *What does being a leader actually look like?*

Jesus holds us to a higher standard and a tougher hope. The bleaker the world looks, the greater the temptation to give up hope.

Today, we join that ancient crowd. As we continue this Lenten journey, our cry remains: *Hosanna! Save us.* We know the path leads through the struggle of Good Friday—there is no detour around the cross. Yet we march on, trusting that God will see us through. And on the **third day**, our hope is not just remembered; it is **reborn!**

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Thanks be to God. **Amen.**