

Additional Teaching Materials for March 28

Here are some more discussion questions that might be helpful:

- When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is hailed as the returning king. But, only a few days later, the crowd shouts “crucify him!” What do you think may explain the crowd’s swift move from an enthusiastic high for Jesus to their abandonment of him? Are there parallels to our own Christian walk? There are times when our own enthusiasm and commitment to Christ are seemingly unbounded – we really *feel it!* But at other times, the reality of Jesus can seem remote and distant; we feel cold and spiritually dry. Why is this? What can we do to stay more constant in our relationship with God? How do you get through periods of spiritual dryness when you do not feel close to God?
- For all Jews other than those living in Jerusalem, the great Festivals, like Passover, were times of pilgrimage. Thousands of Jews from all over Palestine would stream to Jerusalem to gather at God’s temple in unity and celebration as the people of God. What place do pilgrimages have in our lives? Are there pilgrimages you make? Many families make pilgrimages at certain holidays, gathering to celebrate together. Unfortunately, many of us have a tendency to exhaust ourselves in these “pilgrimages.” What ought to characterize our pilgrimages? The coming week leads us to the holiest days in the Christian calendar: Maundy Thursday (the Last Supper), Good Friday (Jesus’ crucifixion and death), and Easter (Jesus’ resurrection). As we finish our pilgrimage to these days, how will you complete your preparation?

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This is a passage from Douglas Hare’s commentary on Matthew.¹ It will give you some more background on today’s passage from Matthew.

The Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1-11)

Jesus will die on the cross as “the King of the Jews” (27:37). The function of the opening passage of the passion narrative is to exhibit Jesus’ royal status in a public way.

It is improbable that Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem manifested as open a claim to kingship as Matthew’s account suggests. Had a large crowd publicly acclaimed Jesus as their king, the Roman garrison would have promptly cooled the messianic ardor. Moreover, there would have been no difficulty in securing witnesses for a Jewish trial. This does not mean that we must consider the incident as created (rather

¹Hare, D. R. A. (1993). *Matthew*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (Page 237). Louisville: John Knox Press.

than interpreted) on the basis of Zech. 9:9. It is probable, however, that the demonstration was on such a small scale that it failed to attract public attention. It may very well have been an “acted parable” in which Jesus consciously acted out the prophecy of Zechariah by riding into the holy city on a donkey. While it was customary for pilgrims to arrive by foot, his action would have seemed only slightly unusual to outsiders. According to John 12:16, not even the disciples perceived the event as the fulfillment of prophecy until after the resurrection.

It seems likely that the incident has been understood and reported in the light of similar stories about triumphal entries (I Kings 1:32–40) and acts of homage to a new king (II Kings 9:13). In Matthew’s account the underlying prophecy is not only explicitly quoted but is placed *before* the event to emphasize that Jesus actively fulfills the messianic prophecy.

A number of translations have gone astray in translating the word *praii* s as “humble,” apparently out of a desire to bring Matthew’s text into greater conformity with the Hebrew of Zech. 9:9. Matthew, however, is here following the Septuagint, which chose to describe the king as *gentle* rather than humble. The quotation thus reinforces the claim of 11:29, “I am *gentle* and humble in heart.” Although the notions of gentleness and humility overlap to some extent and occasionally appear side by side, the second ought not to be allowed to eclipse the first. The quotation thus serves to underline the fact that the gentle king arrives in his capital with no sword in his hand, vulnerable to whatever his enemies will choose to do to him. He who taught “Do not resist one who is evil” (5:39) is prepared to live and die by his own word.

According to the rules of Hebrew poetry, the original prophecy mentions only one animal (“on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey”); both halves of the poetic description refer to a *male* animal. Here Matthew prepares a fresh Greek translation (he does not follow the Septuagint), capitalizing on the fact that the Greek word for donkey can be used for either sex. In this way he is able to take the first allusion to a donkey as referring to a she-ass and the second as speaking of her colt. Does Matthew make the prophecy correspond with the event or the event with his perception of the prophecy? Since the Evangelist undoubtedly knew the rules of poetic parallelism, there is perhaps a slight presumption in favor of the former. An unbroken colt usually accompanied its mother. He tells us that the disciples placed garments (their own cloaks, or saddle clothes?) on both animals and that Jesus sat on them. Some interpreters have ridiculed Matthew for suggesting that Jesus was astride two animals simultaneously. Others have suggested that, since it was common to sit on a donkey with both legs on the same side (sidesaddle style), it is possible that the clothes were thrown over both the donkey and the foal at her side, so that Jesus was seen as riding the pair.

The acclamation of the crowd is more explicitly messianic in Matthew than in Mark: “Hosanna to the Son of David.” *Hosanna* is the Greek transliteration of a Hebrew imperative phrase meaning “save now,” used in Ps. 118:25. Its literal meaning was sometimes forgotten, however; it was used like “Hallelujah,” as an ejaculation of praise (as is “salvation” in Rev. 7:10). “The Son of David” connects this passage with the immediately preceding healing of the blind men (20:30–31).

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” is not explicitly messianic. This line from Ps. 118:26 was employed as a greeting by pilgrims attending temple festivals. It was inevitable, however, that Christian imagination would perceive a greater depth of meaning in the cry. Of all the pilgrims attending that Passover festival only Jesus was “the Coming One” (see 11:3), and only he truly came “in the name of the Lord,” that is, fully empowered and authorized by God. There would also be levels of meaning in “Lord” for Matthew and his readers. In the psalm the Greek *kyrios* (“Lord”) represents the

sacred Tetragrammaton, the name “Yahweh.” Christians, however, used *kyrios* as a title for their risen Lord.

Matthew further heightens the effect of the Messiah’s entry into Jerusalem by reporting that the whole city is shaken as if by an earthquake. The verb *sei*, which is weakly translated “stirred” by the RSV and the NIV, refers to the action of an earthquake (compare its use in 27:51). The corresponding noun *seismos* is used by Matthew in 8:24; 24:7; 27:54; and 28:2 to indicate a supernatural event. Perhaps Matthew means to suggest that the holy city is shaken to its foundations by the arrival of the Lord’s Anointed.

In response to the question of the awed populace, “Who is this?” the Messiah’s entourage responds, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (v. 11). At first glance, this appears to revoke the earlier acclamation of Jesus as Messiah. The titles are not mutually exclusive, however. In 26:68 his enemies challenge him to prophesy while addressing him as “Christ.” The prophet Moses was regarded as a kind of king in Jewish tradition, and David as a prophet (Acts 2:30).

What are we to do with this expanded retelling of what was originally an inconspicuous event? Matthew highlights for us the irony implicit in Jesus’ last pilgrimage to the holy city. The Son of David enters David’s city, but the only throne he finds is a cross. The city that should have welcomed him with its fullest homage refused to accept its gentle king. Shaken as at the news of his birth (2:3), the city sides again with the Herods of this world who maintain the established order. How easy it is for us to think that by celebrating Palm Sunday we acknowledge Jesus as king in a way that Jerusalem failed to do! We need constantly to be humbled by those harsh words that remind us of the superficiality of our Hosannas: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (7:21, NRSV).

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This is from the Background Study I wrote last year for Palm Sunday.

Longing for a king

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel’s greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). *But . . .* four hundred years after David’s death, Jerusalem burned. The Temple built by David’s son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people were in exile. The king of Israel was dead. Indeed, to many Israelites it must have seemed as if God had abandoned them.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were “kings” only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, the Jews had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come, such as in today’s passage from Zechariah. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, when all the world would see that the Jews’ confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God's king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God's kingdom, more than a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar.

The true King

In 27AD or so, one Jew, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, this Jew, named Jesus, had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the Kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy, not vengeance, and peace, not rebellion. Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike the prophets of old, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God's people. Not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, but Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God's people.

As Mark tells us in today's passage, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But, as he had done so often, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Hundreds of years before, the prophet of Zechariah told of God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but the crowds certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They waved palm branches², symbols of abundance and thanks.

Messiahs and Kings

There are certain keys to understanding the Gospels. One of these is the relationship between our understandings of messiah, king, and God. So, at the risk of being repetitive, we will hit this one again.¹

To a first-century Jew, Jesus' claim to be the Messiah was to say that he was God's King, the one who would inaugurate the coming of God's kingdom. This is why Matthew takes pains in the first chapter of his gospel to show that Jesus could lay claim to the house of David, for God's king was to come from David's line.

To a first-century Jew, claiming to be the Messiah was not a claim to be God. There was no sense of divinity in the Jewish understanding of the Messiah.

¹ See the pg 2 text-box in the March 16 study for more. It is available on-line at www.standrewccl.org.

The enthusiasm of the crowds was lost on no one. The Pharisees, the keepers of the old way, were obviously frustrated with the whole thing, for they muttered to themselves, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19).

² John is the only Gospel writer to tell us that the leaves are palm branches. Jews used palms in the Festival of Tabernacles, a time of harvest thanksgiving remembering the wanderings in the wilderness. See Leviticus 23:39-43.

However, Jesus knew that the enthusiasm of the crowds would soon falter. He knew that unless he gave up his course and abandoned the vocation given him by the Father, his confrontation with the Jewish leadership and the Romans would soon come to a head. But of course, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way to the cross. Thanks be to God!

Later in the week, after more confrontations with those who would not hear his words of warning, Jesus would be arrested, tried, and hung to die on a Roman cross, a humiliating death reserved for those who challenged Roman authority. Rather than the triumphant returning king entering Jerusalem, Jesus would wear a crown of thorns under a mocking sign, "King of the Jews." God's victory won on a cross. A world turned upside down.