

Who is this Jesus?

^{NRS} **Matthew 21:1** When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately. " ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Who is this Jesus?

When Jesus was teaching, he wandered from village to village in Galilee, followed by the twelve apostles. He spoke to rustic peasants and the poor who lived in the small towns. Especially attracted to him were the disabled, the unemployed, social outcasts, children, and women. Those without any power in society were drawn to him. Those in positions of power were threatened by his popularity. Jesus left the region of Galilee and headed to Jerusalem. With him were his closest disciples including some women who supported the needs of the group out of their own funds.

Before reaching Jerusalem, Jesus went to Bethany, where his good friend Lazarus had died four days earlier. He raised Lazarus from the dead - and many who witnessed this became followers of Jesus. But the leading priests and other high ranking religious leaders were upset by these events. They met in high council and said to each other, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation. So from that day on they planned to put him to death." (John 11:48 and 53, NRS) Who is this Jesus? The high priests held their positions at the pleasure of the leaders of the Roman occupation. They understood that the popularity of this prophet from the countryside was a threat to Roman good humor and therefore to their own positions. So they sought a way to put Jesus to death.

Jesus headed for Jerusalem for the Passover holiday. Remember what the Passover festival was. When the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, God sent Moses to lead the people out of bondage and back to their ancestral home in Canaan. But Pharaoh resisted and refused to let the people go. After nine plagues, he still resisted. Moses told the Hebrews to pack up and be ready to leave. They were to paint the frame of the door to their home with the blood of the lamb that would be their last meal. That night, death struck down the firstborn child in every family and of all of the livestock, except that death passed over every Hebrew family that had painted the door frame as instructed. Down through the centuries, the Jews remembered and celebrated that they had been passed over - and then released from bondage. Rome understood how celebrating release from captivity could incite the Jews to want to be released from Roman occupation. The Roman governor, who at this time was Pontus Pilate, would leave his magnificent residence in Caesarea on the coast and come to Jerusalem during each of the high holidays. He'd try to make sure that all the holidays remained focused on the past, not the present situation or the future. Passover was a time of especially high tension due to the reason for the celebration.

Two processions approached Jerusalem on a spring day. From the east, the procession was mostly peasants from out of town, coming to the Passover festival. From the west, Pontius Pilate came to Jerusalem on a war horse, leading a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers from Caesarea. The garrison

in Jerusalem was always beefed up to maintain law and order during holidays. There might be as many as 200,000 pilgrims added to 40,000 regular inhabitants, and crowds could easily become mobs, especially when they remembered that their ancestors had gloriously escaped from Egypt. Who was this Jesus? For the Romans, he was a potential troublemaker. He might be the spark that could set off the powder keg of an overcrowded city filled with people who had a history of escaping oppression. For the Romans, this is a popular leader that must be put down.

There was a crowd along the trail from Bethany to Jerusalem. Some had heard of the healings up in Galilee. Some had been among the family and friends who saw Lazarus come out of the tomb. Two blind men, given their sight by Jesus just outside of Jericho, were in the crowd. Bartimaeus, another blind man, was healed as Jesus went up the road to Jerusalem, and he, too, joined the crowd. Who is this Jesus? For many in the crowd along the way into the city, Jesus is a healer, someone who relieves suffering.

For others in the crowd, there's the hope that Jesus is the anointed one who will rescue his people from the bondage of Roman occupation. Perhaps he will lead them to drive the Romans out of Palestine just as Judas Maccabeus had driven out the Greeks two centuries earlier. Perhaps he would get the Roman boot off of their necks. Who is this Jesus? Perhaps Jesus was the messiah that they hoped for so fervently.

Along the roads leading to Jerusalem, pilgrims headed to the festival would shout a traditional blessing for pilgrims at one another. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." To be able to go to the temple in Jerusalem for the feasts and festivals of the faith was a source of great joy. Now, along the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, the people shouted this traditional greeting to Jesus. They also shouted "Hosanna!" which means "Save now!" Save us now! Some meant "Save us from our suffering and illness." Others meant "Save us from those who oppress us!" Jesus was a wanted man. The Temple leaders wanted him dead to preserve the status quo, especially their status quo. The Romans wanted him dead so that the rabble wouldn't be roused to revolt. The peasants at the bottom of society wanted him to heal their infirmities. The downtrodden and angry wanted him to lead a revolt. Jesus was a wanted man.

We tend to picture this parade into Jerusalem as bigger and more messianic than it probably was. Many translations give today's text the title, "The triumphal entry." That may be misleading. If the crowd was huge and really worked up, the Roman garrison would have emptied to put down obvious rebellion before it had a chance to spread. Notice also that the people in the city ask "who is this?" The answer they get from the crowd is that he's a prophet, a preacher - not that Jesus is the messiah.

When we read this story about Jesus coming to Jerusalem, we usually pay a lot of attention to the donkey - or the donkey and her foal, depending on which gospel account is being read. Before long, we're talking about how riding a donkey proves that Jesus is king because that's the title given in Zechariah chapter nine. When we stop there, we have stopped too soon. It's easy to read the old prophet and only see the words "triumphant" and "riding on a donkey." But Zechariah also says the rider of the donkey is humble. Mounting an ass was in itself neither very royal nor very glorious. It was simply a sign of humility. A donkey was a beast of the common working class. In fact, when Matthew quotes the words of the prophet, he leaves out the words "triumphant and victorious" and simply quotes, "humble and riding on a donkey." Who is this Jesus? In our desire to view him as triumphant and victorious, we refer to the entry of Christ into Jerusalem as "the triumphal entry" instead of calling it, as Matthew did, "the humble entry."

In our desire to rush forward to celebrate Easter, we trample on Palm Sunday with whoops and hollers and fail to notice something very important that is going on in this passage. In fact, in John's gospel, we're told that it was much later that the disciples noticed similarities between the entry into Jerusalem and passages of ancient scripture. So, before dashing on to those concerns, we would do well to try to experience today's parade as it unfolds.

In recent weeks, we've been studying the Sermon on the Mount. Now, looking at this story of traveling to Jerusalem, we see that Jesus lives just like he has taught. He has talked the talk and now he walks the walk, as we say today. Don't hide your light under a basket - and so he travels to Jerusalem. Blessed are the meek - and he rides on a donkey, a humble beast of burden. Jesus knows that the Romans will not tolerate popular leaders and the religious experts have been shamed by his teaching - but he taught

that we are blessed when people revile us, persecute us, and utter all kinds of evil against us for speaking the Word. He said, “Do not resist one who is evil” – and he rode on toward Jerusalem. “Love your enemies” – and he rode on. “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” – and he rode on. “Do not be anxious about your life” – and he rode on. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” – and he rode on.

Who is this Jesus? Pilate rode into Jerusalem on a warhorse, sword at his side, armor and helmet protecting his body, with battle-hardened soldiers ready to enforce his will. A gentle king arrived in his capital riding a donkey, without a sword in his hand, surrounded by a few peasants, and completely vulnerable to whatever his enemies choose to do to him. He is prepared to live and die in accord with his teaching. He is walking the talk.

Lordship, even messianic lordship, is shown here in terms of servanthood. Gentleness, humility, peaceableness, mercy, and self-giving acts of generosity and compassion are the distinguishing marks of God’s domain. How does this compare with the messianic expectations of Christians? Is this the Jesus we see? Is this the Jesus we want? Who is Jesus to us?

Jesus’ ways were not those of the violent zealots, or of a political party or a legislative agenda. But make no mistake, Jesus didn’t come to leave the ways of the world as they were. He came to transform the world by transforming, by changing, us.

Who is this Jesus? The Romans feared a revolution, but Jesus did not bring rebellion. The Temple leaders heard criticism, but Jesus called for an even deeper following of the law. Some wanted cures for their physical disabilities, but Jesus brought healing for mind, body, and soul. Some wanted to drive out the ruling powers, but Jesus offered an alternative to the Imperial Roman Empire, not by starting and leading a rebellion, but by teaching people that another way is possible.

Who is this Jesus? We usually see this story as the triumphal entry rather than the humble entry. Yet, in one sense, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was an inaugural parade – the inaugural parade of a new kind of king for a new kind of kingdom.

At one level, Herod is king, Caesar is lord, Pilate is governor, the demons rule, and they will all team up to take Jesus’ life. On another level, Jesus is Lord and King and Messiah, the forces of heaven rule, and no one will take his life – he will give it freely. Amen.

^{NRS} **Zechariah 9:9-10** 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. ¹⁰ He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

John 12:16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.