
Entering Jerusalem

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 24 March 2024 Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a • Philippians 2:1-11 • Mark 11:1-11



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

As we have reenacted this year, like we do every year, Jesus has entered Jerusalem to the shouts and cheers of the crowds. It is a scene of wild celebration as the donkey slowly carries Jesus up the main street of Jerusalem. An ignorant bystander might think that a general or a king is arriving after a terrible and glorious battle, and the crowds are hailing his victory.

But this king has not yet gained his victory, a victory greater than any military success. And this is not a king to lead troops into battle, amid the harsh sounds of marching boots and war-cries. No, this king's victory will come quietly, with only a single voice, his own, crying out at the last moment — and then silence. No one will celebrate the moment of victory. No one will understand it for a

little while, not even his closest associates. This victory will come from the silence of the tomb.

But that is still in the future, and we are on the road with Jesus riding by, joining our shouts to those of the crowds. So let us look around us, and search our hearts and minds, and think about what is happening here.

First, why is Jesus entering Jerusalem in this way? He could hardly pick a more public and obvious way to enter the city. Up to this point, he has been careful to avoid the public authorities. While not actually hiding away, he has shunned publicity. The Gospels tell of several occasions when he has spoken of himself or cured people of diseases and then told them not to tell anybody else about it. (They usually ignore him, it is true, but he does tell them this.) When Peter correctly identified him as the Christ, “Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him” (Mark 8:30). On another occasion he slips away when a crowd is gathering to stone him and trying to seize him, in almost a miraculous manner (John 10:39). Why this change from avoiding publicity to actively courting it? It is because his time has come, and the authorities must have a reason to arrest him. By stirring up the crowds as he does, he becomes a clear threat to the public order. These events must happen for him to accomplish his great mission, as set for him by his Father.

And what happens here in Jerusalem fulfils the scriptures. We have the prophet Zechariah writing:

Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion!
Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem!
Look, your king is coming to you!
He comes triumphant and victorious,
but humble and riding on a donkey—
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech 9:9)

Jesus is indeed the king coming to his people. And immediately after his entrance, he goes to the temple, as Malachi prophesied: “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come” (Mal 3:1). Again, these things must take place so that his mission will be accomplished.

And what of the crowds? Likely there were a number of people who had seen Jesus perform miracles, even those that he did outside of Jerusalem, as we are often told that some of his disciples followed him around the countryside. Their enthusiasm would have stirred up the crowds. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Holy Spirit also acted to inspire them to celebrate. This is a riotous celebration, and the last time that Jesus will have the will of the crowds with him. Contrast it with the vicious crowd calling for his crucifixion not many days later.

Finally, why does Jesus come to Jerusalem at all? He once lamented over Jerusalem:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!

(Matt 23:37)

Jesus loves Jerusalem and cries for the lost sheep which live there. Here is where his earthly ministry must end, for here is the centre of the Jewish world he was sent to save. It is also the seat of the Roman government for the region, and Jesus must go to the very highest power in the land: a true king challenging a mere earthly king, the eternal Son of God standing up before the mortal emperor. And so he does, coming before the high priests and then Pontius Pilate. These are the events which will unfold in the coming week.

But for now, we are with the crowds on the dusty streets of Jerusalem. Listen to their chant:

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” (Matt 11:9-10)

And they are right, for Jesus is the son of David, and he comes in the name of God. Let us give thanks and celebrate. Hosanna! and Amen.