
Riding into Jerusalem

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 29 March 2026

Philippians 2:5-11 • Matthew 21:1-11



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

We did not have it read this morning, but the passage from Isaiah from our lectionary sets us up for Jesus's final journey:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

...

The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint ...

...

It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

(Isaiah 50:4-9)

His determination to serve his Father and to complete the task which his Father has set him comes through every line: “I did not turn backwards ... I have set my face like flint ... who will contend with me?” (Isa 50:5, 7, 8) More than anything else, this text sets his journey to the cross in stark terms, a straight-line drive towards his sacrificial death. We see the real Jesus here:

- He is a teacher: throughout his ministry, he has sought to present the word of God to those who follow him, and to those around him. He has not been afraid to stand up in the marketplace, or on a hilltop, or at the seashore, and proclaim the truth of God’s grace. He has “sustain[ed] the weary with a word.” Many indeed were weary, and were waiting for such a word. Many listened; many turned away; some began to follow, for their ears and their minds were prepared by God to hear the word of his Son. At the same time, Jesus himself was a listener. Just as the master must be ready to be a servant, the teacher must also be ready to learn, for this is how the kingdom of God works. In our second hymn we sang, “In lowly pomp ride on to die.” Lowly pomp — we celebrate the highest in the lowest. This is a central part of Jesus’s teachings.
- He is obedient to his father: “I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards.” (Isa 50:5) There is no denying that Jesus’s road was a hard one. The task which his Father set him to do was dangerous and difficult, and on the surface at least did not end well — indeed, it will end in dishonour and death. Honour is terrifically important in the society of the day, which made it all the harder for the people to accept that their Messiah would be condemned as a criminal and publicly executed. Jesus, although born into that society, did not turn back from insult and spitting, but persevered up to the end.
- He recognises that it is not his strength, but his Father’s which carries him on. “The Lord God helps me, therefore ...”. Therefore he can be strong; therefore, he can set his face like flint, and push on; therefore, he knows he will be vindicated. In his ministry, Jesus tells his disciples that it is not he, but his Father, whom they see when they look at him. He is not the one who does miracles; he is not the one who feeds the five thousand with a loaf and two fishes; it is his Father in heaven who does this, through him. His strength is the Father’s strength.
- He knows that his Father will judge rightly, and that as long as he does his Father’s bidding, he will be able to contend with any adversaries. “It is the

Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?” (Isa 50:9) Who indeed? For justice comes from on high, and judgment comes from God. It is not Jesus who will judge, but our Father in heaven.

Secure in obedience, sustained by faith, armed with God’s teaching, backed by God’s judgment, Jesus presses forward. We find him in a brief moment of popular acclaim. His fame as a healer and miracle-doer has preceded him to Jerusalem, and the disciples who follow him on the road meet up with the people of the city to form a cheering crowd. They strew palm fronds on his path. They cry, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” They hail him as “the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Matt 21:9) They call him “prophet” and all the city is in turmoil.

This should be the great moment of his success, a moment of celebration and justification. But it is not this which Jesus seeks. Even as he receives the acclamation of the crowds, which no doubt the disciples are enjoying, and see as his (and their) well-earned reward, Jesus keeps the end in sight. To remind them of God’s justice, Jesus rides, not on a horse or in a chariot, but on a donkey: “Your king comes to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.” How easy it might be to let the cheers of the crowd go to his head! But again, it is not this which Jesus seeks. He continues to teach them, even as he rides in triumphal procession. The great shall be humbled, and the humble shall be exalted. As he often does, Jesus points away from himself. He is not their king, but his Father in heaven.

The crowds, too, as far as we know, were not made up of the wealthy and powerful, but of the common people, those who would likely be out and about on the streets, and who would have heard Jesus’s teachings. Jesus has not come to the kings and the princes, but to all the people. This is not to say that Jesus would prevent a rich man from being his disciple; but his ministry has a different basis — not privilege or wealth, but faith and justice.

And so Jesus comes into Jerusalem, and we follow him in our hearts. Will we follow him to the end? Can we drink the cup he is to drink? We can, for his sacrifice frees us to be wholly his children, let loose from the sins which wear us down. We are free to imitate Christ:

- to be teachers of his word, and to be listeners as well.
- to be servants to our Lord, and to his people.
- to be obedient to our Father in heaven, as he was obedient.
- to know the strength which comes from God, who is our strength.

- to know that we will be judged, and not to fear the coming judgment; for we have honestly sought to see God's face and to follow God's ways, as Jesus teaches us.

The last difficult days are still ahead, when human acclaim turns to human condemnation. It cannot be otherwise, for God has ordained it. Therefore, let us spend these last difficult days in prayer and contemplation, knowing that if we push through to the end, we will rise again with Jesus on the third day. In the name of the one who is truly our Lord and Saviour — Amen.