

# Matthew 20:17-19; 21:1-11

<sup>20:17</sup> While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, <sup>18</sup>“See, we

**T**he Kingdom was indeed coming; he who was to come—the Messiah—was coming. At last. But the donkey should have warned them that it would not be the kingdom of their dreams—he was coming peaceably, not as for war. —Frank Sheed, *To Know Christ Jesus*

are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; <sup>19</sup>then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.” . . .

<sup>21:1</sup>When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> “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.”

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>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!”

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

(See also Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-40; John 12:12-19.)

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Centuries earlier the obedience of Yahweh’s “servant” had been foretold in similar words: “I have set my face like flint / and I know that I shall not be put to shame; / he who vindicates me is near” (Isaiah 50:7-8). Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem before—perhaps even yearly to celebrate the Passover in accord with the law (see Luke 2:41)—but this journey would be his last. Now, resolutely headed toward the Holy City, Jesus approached his own Passover, the culmination of his mission finally at hand. Once again he told his apostles, as he had earlier, of his impending death and resurrection. And yet again, they failed to understand him (see Matthew 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34).

Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead into the village of Bethphage to fetch a donkey and its colt for him, instructing them, “If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them’” (Matthew 21:3). Archbishop Fulton Sheen once commented on the irony of such a statement coming from the Son of God:

Perhaps no greater paradox was ever written than this—on the one hand the sovereignty of the Lord, and on the other His “need.” This combination of Divinity and dependence, of possession and poverty was the consequence of the Word becoming flesh. Truly, He who was rich became poor for our sakes, that we might be rich. He borrowed a boat from a fisherman from which to preach; He borrowed barley loaves and fishes from a boy to feed the multitude; . . . and now He borrowed an ass on which to enter Jerusalem. Sometimes God preempts and requisitions the things of man, as if to remind him that everything is a gift from Him. It is sufficient for those who know Him to hear: “The Lord hath need of it.” (*Life of Christ*)

It was popularly believed by many Jews that the Messiah would come at Passover time to establish his kingdom. In Galilee, Jesus had

avoided a crowd's attempt to crown him king (see John 6:15), and he refused to be called Messiah. But now, by riding into David's city on a donkey rather than walking as pilgrims usually did, he openly proclaimed his identity as the long-awaited one. With this symbolic action he fulfilled the ancient prophecies about the coming of Israel's Messiah-King: "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" (Zechariah 9:9; see also Isaiah 62:11; John 12:15).

Jubilant crowds greeted Jesus with loud cries of "Hosanna!" They spread their cloaks and palm branches on the ground in his path as they hailed him as "Son of David" (Matthew 21:9) and celebrated his kingship. In doing so, they were recalling the promises Yahweh had made to King David, promises of an eternal dynasty and of a kingdom that would last forever. Despite the disasters and sins of the monarchy that unfolded after the reign of David, the Jewish

Ultimately, God's promise to David would be fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

people had for centuries kept alive the hope that these promises would be fulfilled by a future "hero-king." Descended from David, this anointed leader or "Messiah" would free Israel from the yoke of foreign oppression, restore the kingdom, establish perfect justice, and revive the glorious reign of David forever.

Burning with nationalism, many in the crowd that first Palm Sunday looked to "the prophet Jesus from Nazareth" (Matthew 21:11) as a political savior. But Jesus did not come on a warhorse to liberate the land from Roman occupation and establish an independent Jewish state. Rather, he came astride a young ass, on a mission of peace—and he would come into his kingly reign through the cross.

Jesus wept over the fact that Jerusalem had failed to recognize the time of its visitation (see Luke 19:41-44). Although at the moment the crowds wildly greeted him, the people of Israel misunderstood the true meaning of Jesus' messiahship. Yet their faith would be vindicated: ultimately, God's promise to David would be fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

# Understand!

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1. Note several ways in which Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem points to his messianic identity and role. Why, in your opinion, was it important for Jesus to demonstrate that Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah were fulfilled in him?

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2. What paradox is reflected in Zechariah's descriptive prophecy? What meaning or significance do you see in the donkey beyond its prophetic undertones?

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3. How would you describe the atmosphere and mood of the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem? How do you think this affected Jesus?

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4. Read 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3-4; and Matthew 22:41-45. In light of these texts, why do you think Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem provoked such an intense reaction among the people? Why did they hail him as the "Son of David" (Matthew 21:9)?

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5. Read Luke 19:29-40 to gain another perspective on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. What information does Luke supply that is not noted by Matthew? What does the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus in Luke 19:39-40 add to your understanding of Jesus and his character?

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## ► In the Spotlight In the Words of the Saints

Let us run to accompany Christ as he hastens toward his passion, and imitate those who met him then, not by covering his path with garments, olive branches or palms, but by doing all we can to prostrate ourselves before him by being humble and by trying to live as he would wish. Then we shall be able to receive the Word at his coming, and God, whom no limits can contain, will be within us.

—St. Andrew of Crete

Jesus . . . makes do with a poor animal for a throne. I don't know about you; but I am not humiliated to acknowledge that in the Lord's eyes I am a beast of burden: "I am like a donkey in your presence; but I am continually with you. You hold my right hand" (Psalm 73:22-23), you take me by the bridle.

—St. Josemaría Escrivá

With his entry into Jerusalem, Christ begins his journey of love and sorrow, which is the Cross. Look to him with renewed and zealous faith. Follow him! He does not promise illusory happiness; on the contrary, in order for you to achieve authentic human and spiritual maturity, he invites you to follow his demanding example, making his exacting choices your own.

—Pope John Paul II

## Grow!

1. Jesus came resolutely to Jerusalem, knowing that he would be crucified there. Recall a time when you "set your face like flint" (Isaiah 50:7) and persevered in doing something that you felt the Lord was asking of you, even though you knew you might be met with

criticism or a negative response. How did you experience God at work in this incident? What fruit came from your obedience?

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2. What skills, talents, or resources has the Lord asked you to put at his disposal because he has “need” of them? In what areas might you be more generous and allow him to use you more effectively?

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3. Imagine yourself in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. What role would you have played? If Jesus were to enter your town today, how do you think various people—for example, politicians, CEOs, churchgoers, the homeless, children, scholars—would respond to him?

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4. Are you comfortable or do you feel inhibited in expressing your love for Jesus in front of family members and friends? Strangers? How do you feel when others publicly show their devotion to the Lord? Inspired? Embarrassed? Explain.

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5. Think of a situation, relationship, or area of your life that is difficult for you to surrender to the Lord. Write a prayer to praise and thank Jesus for the ways that you experience his kingship, and to ask him for grace to submit this difficulty fully to his rule and authority over you.

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► **In the Spotlight**  
**Contemporary Voices**

The gospel texts speak of [Jesus’] entrance into Jerusalem in terms that are redolent of a *parousia*—the arrival of an emperor in a triumphant victory parade with songs of celebration and welcome. In thus commemorating [in the Palm Sunday liturgy] this past event in the life of Jesus, we are at the same time expressing our faith that “he will come again in glory to

judge the living and the dead.” It is then that the entire world will understand the meaning of what transpired that day in Jerusalem. Jesus, in an anticipatory symbolic act, declared his Messiahship by entering Jerusalem. He came to fulfill all that the Father willed his Messiah to accomplish on the way to becoming king. This faith vision is meant to illumine our understanding of Jesus’ journey, through the abasement and pain of the cross, to his present state at God’s right hand.

—Francis Martin, *The Fire in the Cloud: Lenten Meditations*

## Reflect!

1. Upon entering a city, monarchs are often welcomed by an honor guard or parade. Streets and buildings may be decorated with banners for the royal visit, and crowds greet the royal person’s arrival with enthusiastic shouts of acclamation. Respect is also shown to monarchs by gestures and honorific titles. For example, men bow and women curtsy (“make a courtesy”) when presented to a queen, and a king is usually addressed as “Your Majesty.”

How have you welcomed Jesus into your life as your king and Lord? How do you show him honor and reverence? Consider the postures used and the titles given to God in liturgical worship.

2. Reflect on the following Scripture passages to deepen your understanding of how God is given honor and acclaim in worship:

David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly; David said: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted

as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

—1 Chronicles 29:10-13

Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the people of Israel, in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. . . . Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. . . . It was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the LORD,

“For he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever,”

the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.

—2 Chronicles 5:2, 7, 13-14

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him;  
tell of all his wonderful works.

Glory in his holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

—Psalm 105:1-3

I [John] looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

—Revelation 7:9-12

## ► In the Spotlight Hosanna!

“Hosanna” is the Greek and English transliteration of the Hebrew entreaty *hosa na*, meaning “Save (us),” “Give salvation,” or “Help (us)!” Originally the word simply expressed a plea for deliverance or a cry for rescue from danger (see 2 Samuel 14:4), but over time it became an invocation of blessing and even an acclamation of praise:

Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!

O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.

We bless you from the house of the LORD.  
(Psalm 118:25-26)

Many biblical scholars surmise that Psalm 118 depicts a celebration of a king’s victory in the Temple. Verse 27 exhorts: “Bind

the festal procession with branches.” Recalling that psalm, the crowds who welcomed Jesus with hosannas and waved palm branches before him may have expected that he would proceed to the Temple and affirm his kingship at the altar by declaring, as in verse 19, “Open to me the gates of righteousness.”

In the Eucharistic liturgy we recite or sing the *Sanctus*, “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Each time we do so, we celebrate and proclaim anew Christ’s kingship.

## Act!

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Gestures speak loudly and often express our feelings better than words. The crowds jubilantly spread their cloaks and palm branches on the road before Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. David leapt and danced with joyful abandon before the ark of the Lord (see 2 Samuel 6:14, 16). The wise men knelt and prostrated themselves in homage before the infant Jesus (see Matthew 2:11). Mary of Bethany poured precious ointment over Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair (see John 12:3).

This week add some “body language” to your prayer times to express your worship and love of God. Lift your arms in praise, bow in reverence, dance with joy, lie prostrate on the floor, or even march around as a symbolic way of sharing in Jesus’ victory over sin and death. Don’t be constrained by conventions and more familiar forms of prayer. You may want to do this when you’re alone so you don’t feel inhibited by the presence of others. Spontaneous and heartfelt gestures can lead you into a deeper relationship with the Lord.

► In the Spotlight  
From the *Catechism of the  
Catholic Church*

How will Jerusalem welcome her Messiah? Although Jesus had always refused popular attempts to make him king, he chooses the time and prepares the details for his messianic entry into the city of “his father David.” Acclaimed as son of David, as the one who brings salvation . . . , the “King of glory” enters his City “riding on an ass.” Jesus conquers the Daughter of Zion, a figure of his Church, neither by ruse nor by violence, but by the humility that bears witness to the truth. And so the subjects of his kingdom on that day are children and God’s poor, who acclaim him as had the angels when they announced him to the shepherds. (559)

Jesus went up to Jerusalem voluntarily, knowing well that there he would die a violent death because of the opposition of sinners (cf. Hebrews 12:3). (569)

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem manifests the coming of the kingdom that the Messiah-King, welcomed into his city by children and the humble of heart, is going to accomplish by the Passover of his Death and Resurrection. (570)