

The Not-So-Triumphal Entry

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday/16th March 2008

Bible translators often insert chapter or story headings that try to summarize the text that, in time, become part of the text. Sometimes they're a help; more often than not they're a hindrance, as they can adversely affect the interpretation. For example, viewing Luke 15 as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" might better be called the parable of the prodigal *father*. Another good example is our gospel text this morning, Matthew 21, often described as Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. It's the image of *triumph* that seems to stick with this text; it informs how we view this day with all of its pomp and palm waving (Although, did you notice, Matthew never says anything about palms?). But I'm beginning to wonder if this is really the best way to view the events of Palm Sunday. I'm beginning to think that there's something else going on in this story that's not immediately obvious. In fact, it just might be what's *missing* from this text that offers a window into what Matthew is trying to say. In other words, *Matthew omits something, and what he omits serves to make a profound theological point that was no doubt shocking then and should still give us reason to pause, lest we proceed too quickly to Easter and assume that we fully fathom the events of Holy Week.*

It all has to do with Matthew's insertion of the oracle from Zechariah 9:9 into his Palm Sunday account. In typical Matthean fashion, he loves to use Hebrew Scriptures to make his theological claims for Jesus. His usual phrase goes like this: "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet..." A good example is 1:22-23 (the prophecy regarding the virgin birth). However, it's not beyond Matthew to actually modify his use of the Old Testament, and at one point he makes up prophecy that can't be squared with the Old Testament, such as 2:23, "There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'" This prophecy isn't in the Old Testament. Matthew intentionally alters the text – he's not concerned about historical accuracy (as we might be); that's not his reason for writing. He wants to make a *theological point*; he wants to say something about *God*, about how God is working through Jesus, about what Jesus is doing through God. It's the theological point that matters. And sometimes he makes this point by leaving something out.

Let's look at this closely: Matthew tells us that Jesus' approach to the city fulfills Zechariah 9:9. "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.” First, Matthew either ignores or misses the intentional use of Hebrew repetition for emphasis. Zechariah is actually referring to just one animal, not two. However, Matthew creates this awkward image of Jesus straddling two animals, the colt *and* a donkey – I would have liked to have seen that! Second, some suggest that there’s hidden meaning here, that the donkey is a coronation animal, to stress the royal status of Jesus as the Son of David. The colt may represent Jesus’ status as a servant.

However, more significantly, if we go to Zechariah 9:9, read the oracle and compare it to Matthew’s quotation, we will see it’s verbatim, except for this; there are three words missing: “*triumphant and victorious.*” Matthew omits “triumphant and victorious.” It is here that we begin to have a sense of what this entry is *not*, that something else is going on that Matthew is trying to tell us, something about this experience in Jerusalem and this Jesus and the God he serves.

I remember learning as a boy that Jesus’ triumphal entry on a colt was meant to be in sharp contrast to the Emperor or conquering hero riding in triumph on a white stallion into a defeated city. Recently, I learned this isn’t the case. We have to be careful here how we read this story. Technically speaking, a Roman triumph (*triumphus*), was a civil ceremony and religious rite, held to honor publicly a military victory. They were only held in Rome, at the request of the Emperor. This means we can be pretty sure that Matthew never witnessed one, although he must have known about them. When Titus destroyed Jerusalem and sacked the Temple in 70 AD, his conquest was celebrated with a triumph in Rome, which included the construction of a triumphal arch (that still stands in the Roman Forum). There were specific qualifications that had to be met before a triumph was offered (such as, verification that 5000 enemy were slain in a battle). The triumph lasted for days. And finally, the Emperor never rode on a horse, but in a circular chariot. Over the 1200 years of the Roman Empire, about 500 of these were celebrated. The last one was held in Constantinople in 534.¹

So what is going on here? Why did Matthew omit “triumphant and victorious”? Perhaps Matthew had something else in mind. What we need to remember as we read these texts and move through Holy Week is that have to be careful that we don’t over-spiritualize the message and decontextualize the story – a fancy word meaning remove it from its context. Yes, we know the story of Holy

¹ The classic study of the Roman *Triumphus* is by William Ramsay, professor of humanity in the University of Glasgow, in William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London, 1875).

Week is ultimately about God loving us so much and demonstrating that love, even on a cross. But there's more than just spiritual or religious ideas going on here. The text has a context and that context is the Roman Empire. It's not unimportant. Rome is not just the historical background for the drama of God's redemption. It's actually in the *foreground*, in fact it's so much in the foreground for the New Testament writers that most of them don't even bother to refer to it explicitly. But they don't have to describe it because they're already *in* it, because they're immersed in Roman culture, in all of its values and religious beliefs, and under the weight of its oppressive power that declared peace – the *Pax Romana* – at the point of a spear. New Testament scholars are helping us rediscover the Roman context of the Gospels. I'm grateful for Dr. Michael Gorman of the Ecumenical Institute for opening my eyes several years ago to this way of reading scripture. Sure, Matthew describes a humble procession. Jesus' procession into the city was not about declaring triumph or declaring victory, he comes in a different way, humbly, to offer a different way – but different compared to what and to whom? The obvious answer is the *Empire* – and the Empire with all its strength was very nervous, especially during Passover.

We know from the Jewish historian, Josephus (37- c. after 100), religious festivals made the Romans very anxious. The population of Jerusalem swelled from 40,000 to 200,000, with pilgrims coming to celebrate Passover, like Jesus. The city was a powder keg waiting to explode. The Roman governors increased security during this time, marching legions from their administrative center in Caesarea Maritima along the coast, up to Jerusalem to keep peace – again at the point of the spear. Roman soldiers lined the corridors and courtyards of the Temple Mount. The Roman occupation of Judea and Galilee was ruthless. They loved to taunt the Jews. Pontius Pilate, just after becoming governor in 26 AD, smuggled into Jerusalem an effigy of Caesar, an obvious abomination to the Jews. The Roman Imperial eagle was placed over the entrance to the Temple to Yahweh.²

And the Temple – which is where Jesus eventually goes – was at this time identified with Herod the Great (73-4 BC), the client-king for Rome, appointed by Rome, who enlarged the Temple Mount into one of the largest, if not the largest building project in the Roman Empire and perhaps the most magnificent temple in the Empire. The Temple was covered with gold and marble and, according to

² Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 132. See also Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Josephus, glistened in the sun. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, there is no King of the Jews. Rome ruled through the governor and appointed authorities in the Temple. It was religiously important, of course, but the high priest and the temple authorities had a difficult task. Their primary obligation was to Rome. They had to make sure that the annual tribute to Rome was paid. They had to maintain domestic order and peace. The Temple authorities were collaborators, thus subject to all kinds of abuse and corruption. It becomes easier to see why Jesus was such a threat – to the Temple *and* to Rome – and why they told Jesus’ disciples to be quiet.³

Religion and politics were intertwined for Matthew, particularly here, which makes this an emotionally charged text, maybe especially for us who like to keep religion separate from politics. We might try to keep them apart, but that was not what it was like in Jesus’ world or in Matthew’s. *To cleanse the Temple is an attack on the Temple authorities in collaboration with Rome, which was also an attack upon Rome in their oppression of God’s people – people who desperately needed a liberator and savior who would wield power in a creative, redemptive way.*

When the Roman armies arrived from Caesarea Maritima they entered the city from the west, full of pomp and ceremony, flexing their imperial muscle. When Jesus entered the city, he probably arrived from the east, down the Mount of Olives, as if to say he’s not like Rome. So there are really *two* processions going on here.⁴ And, although it’s a humble procession, if you read it very carefully it has all the markings of a *carefully orchestrated, perfectly calibrated powerfully symbolic, politically prophetic demonstration against the abuses in the Temple and Empire.* It’s a drama that develops with breathtaking speed, with shouting, waving branches. The text suggests a crowd that grows through the procession, with increased energy and fervor. The whole city seemed to quake with his appearance and the rumblings of the crowd. Why was the city in so much turmoil? Because the crowds were shouting titles and phrases that would have caused considerable alarm. “The one who is coming,” – *ho erkomenos* – was probably a Messianic title. “Hosanna,” meaning “Save, we pray.” “Hosanna or glory or hail, Son of David,” refers to David who was *king*. You see, the “crowds” took a considerable risk in saying “Hosanna” in the presence of Rome. To rally around Jesus as a descendant of David was really “a battle cry against Rome.” We can well-imagine

³ Borg & Crossan, 19.

⁴ The thesis of Borg & Crossan.

Roman soldiers looking on at all of this. And we know that Roman soldiers lined the corridors and open areas of the Temple Mount, especially during festivals.⁵

This was not a triumphal entry – but an “anti-triumphal entry, a calculated alternative to imperial normalcy.”⁶ If this is so, it’s a blistering critique of the way religion and empire can be oppressive and pervert the life God desires for us. Matthew is making a powerful theological claim, but a theological claim made in a concrete, historical setting which says something to Christians who live in history, in an age of Empire or not.

Matthew tells us that Jesus offers a different way, offers an alternative vision, a still more perfect way. Yes, there’s an intermingling of religion and politics here – there’s no way around it without being unfaithful to the text. It’s a story that speaks to the potentially explosive relationship between religion and politics in a culture such as ours that both fears their mutual influence and yet, in some circles, seeks to meld them together in new and dangerous theocracies. This intermingling becomes unsettling in times of national crisis, especially when the church tries to speak prophetically in a time of war – especially the one that started five years ago this Wednesday, that has cost \$800 billion so far, \$12 billion per month. More than 4,000 U.S. soldiers have been killed, more than 60,000 wounded, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed, and more than 4 million made refugees. What is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to say? What are we called to do? Or are we to remain silent and say nothing?

Perhaps we can reframe the religion and politics debate, as least for us as Christians, and think in terms of *power* – because that’s really what’s at stake here as we approach Holy Week. It’s about power. Who is really in control? Jesus or Caesar? It’s about the Kingdom of *God* displaying an alternative form of power that makes every other empire or kingdom of human power very uncomfortable. Will power only be used to destroy, torture, kill, terrorize, intimidate, and enslave human beings? Or can the “will to power,” to quote Nietzsche (1844-1900), be redeemed by a different power, the power of love and grace and forgiveness to save, to make whole, to liberate?⁷ The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, especially as we move through Holy Week, “...the person who sees

⁵ See in particular, Josephus, *The Jewish Wars*, trans. by G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Books, 1981).

⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 132.

⁷ “Will to power” is a theme that runs throughout Nietzsche’s writings and was the title of a posthumously published book, *Der Wille zur Macht*.

Jesus sees the one who was crucified in the name of the mighty gods of the *imperium Romanum*.”⁸ The cross is really all about power – it’s Roman imperial power, the power of evil, the destructive power at work in the human heart that crucifies God, that puts Jesus to death. Everything we relive this coming week was a massive power struggle and remains a massive power struggle. In the end, it’s God’s power that prevails, that raises Jesus – yes, triumphant and victorious, absolutely, ALLELUIA! – but *not* the Roman way and that’s the point, a way that everyone who prefers to worship Caesar will never fully fathom. This is what the cross in this sanctuary is all about. It’s become a constant reminder to us about God’s use of power.

God’s power in the end prevails by taking on every principality and power that seeks the undoing of God and God’s people, by absorbing into himself all the pain and suffering and sin and death, all the horrors of human existence, absorbing it all into himself, and then *loving* it, then *transforming* it, returning not evil for evil (1 Peter 3:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:15), but mercy, *always* mercy. This is God’s way, this is the proper use of power, this is how God is triumphant and victorious – on a cross, where he says to the Romans and to us, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

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⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 101.