

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Matthew 21:1-11

"This Is Jesus..."

Thousands – perhaps tens of thousands – of pilgrims flocked into Jerusalem for Passover. As they trudged up the 3000-foot climb from Jericho and came over the Mount of Olives to see the city spread out before them across the Kidron Valley, their excitement always grew. Some sang *Hallel* Psalms: *"This is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."* *"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD."* *"Hosianna"* – by the 1st century a shout of praise to God, it's original meaning of *"Lord, save us"* almost lost now.

Among the crowds are Jesus and a group of his disciples – the Twelve, some women who accompanied and supported them, doubtless many others who loved this "prophet from Nazareth." They are all part of the throng until Jesus calls for a donkey. He is going to ride into the city. Not that nobody rode, but few could afford it – a donkey could cost a peasant a year's wages. So the crowd takes notice, and before long the singing seems to be directed at him – no doubt because some of Jesus' followers caught the symbolism of the donkey and remembered as Matthew does the Messianic prophecy of Zechariah: *"Rejoice, Zion! See, your king comes... gentle and riding on a donkey."*

So for those with eyes to see, the king was re-entering his city, the Lord was returning to Zion, as it had been prophesied! Matthew says the whole city was *"stirred"* by the news – *"quaked"* would be a more literal translation, as in an earthquake. For people who had no idea what was going on, the natural question was *"Who is this?"* The

simple answer was *"This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."*

Now understand that this was not the best of introductions! Although some people saw the king, *"the Son of David"* arriving, most would have heard "the prophet from Nazareth" as something like "this is that man from Baiting Hollow, or Riverhead, or some remote place 'out east.'" It was commonly said in Jerusalem, *"can anything good come out of Galilee"* – that half-Gentile area north of Samaria? So *who* is this? Well, go back a few days with the pilgrims, and ask what they had seen and heard of this Jesus.

1) Compassionate Healer

Coming through Jericho, the crowds of pilgrims passed roadside beggars who came out for festivals, hoping for generosity from the pilgrims. They were probably as numerous, and as unseen, as homeless people and panhandlers on the streets of New York. Who wants to stop for beggars, when you are nearly in Jerusalem, on your way to the Temple? Anyway, beggars are disreputable, unclean, probably infectious, possibly dangerous – the ultimate "outsiders."

So what does this Jesus do, over the protests of the Twelve, but stop to speak to two of them who have called him *"Son of David!"* *"What do you want?"* *"To see again!"* So he reaches out and *touches* them! And they see again, and they get up and follow him. Where the pilgrims and the disciples fear

contamination and delay, Jesus feels compassion. Who is this? This is Jesus the compassionate healer.

2) Humble Leader

Go back another day on the pilgrimage. The mother of James and John asks Jesus to reserve places on his right and left hand "in his kingdom" for her sons. Jesus tells the men they have no idea what they are asking for; that the way into leadership in his kingdom is through suffering. The other ten Apostles are incensed at James and John's request, and a row ensues.

Jesus calls them together, and says 'you have got it all wrong.' *"Gentile leaders 'lord it' over their subjects, but it shall not be so among you."* The servant will rule in his kingdom; he will show them the way (because they evidently have not yet grasped it after 3 years with him) – he will serve them all by his Passion. Who is this? Jesus, the Son of Man who came to serve.

3) Gracious Owner

He had told a parable, which the crowd of pilgrims must have pondered. The owner of a vineyard hired day workers from the town square: some early, others later in the day. At the end he paid them all a full day's wages, and some of those who worked the full day complained at the unfairness of it. What is wrong with you? says the owner – you got what I promised you; but *"are you envious because I am generous?"*

Everyone knew the word "vineyard" invariably meant Israel. But who were these "part-day workers" who were being treated generously? Lazy people? People who had not "come into the vineyard" in the past? Excluded, unclean people? Was Jesus talking about all these tax-collectors and prostitutes and low-lives that he had been spending so much time with? Gentiles in the kingdom of God? Surely not! But maybe an owner who is moved by grace and not by fairness might just do that! This is Jesus, the teacher of grace.

4) Willing Sacrifice

There was one more strand from the previous days of pilgrimage – Jesus had been talking about dying. He told the Twelve, for about the third time, that when they got to Jerusalem he would be betrayed, condemned, handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, flogged and crucified. And on the third day he would be raised to life. In all this he said he would be *"giving his life as a ransom for many."*

Of course no-one had any idea what he was talking about. Only as these things began to unfold did even his closest friends begin to grasp them. Who is this? This is Jesus, the willing sacrifice who *"lays down his life for his friends."*

5) Still We Ask...

But still we ask, "Who is this?" This is the prophet who teaches us God's will and way, the healer who reaches out to people beside the road, the leader who won't put up with status-seekers, the generous owner, the Son of God who lays down his life for his friends.

Have we grasped yet who he is? We should examine ourselves in Holy Week, and ask what we have learned. Are we still running according to the world's values, or to Christ's? Is status still a major motivation for our actions? Do we care so much about other people's opinions of us that we bend and twist ourselves to conform to their expectations? Are we two or three different personas at home, in the church, at work – each designed to meet what we imagine other people expect of us? Are we so desperate to be liked or loved or admired?

Status is a terrible master to serve, because we can never be sure we are doing enough or doing it right. And when we do get just a bit of it, we find the temptation to "lord it over other people" just about irresistible. Jesus would say that we need to reorient ourselves to "the audience of one" – to our Lord, our Maker, Sustainer and Redeemer, and say "may the words of my mouth and the

meditations of my heart be *acceptable to you*." Lord, help us learn that you value suffering and service, not status.

Are we still motivated by issues of "fairness" – as though we deserve it? Are we envious because God, or somebody else, is generous? If we want strict accounting, measure for measure, we'd better watch out, or we may receive more than we bargain for! God is *gracious*, not fair – at least according to our standards of fairness, which are clouded by ignorance and envy! If God wants to be good to people we don't think deserve it, who are we to complain? Look around at our nation, and decide what part of the public anger we see every day now is driven by ignorance, resentment, fear, and envy. "Keep the government's hands off my Medicare!" "Why should the government use my tax money to bail out homeowners who are 'under water' on their mortgages?"

Do we have enough compassion in us to "stop for the poor beggars who have nothing," or would that delay us too much, be scary, get us dirty or in danger? Do we spend our lives walking past the open hands, because we think these people are all druggies or con-men, and once we give them something they will never leave us alone? Do we secretly believe that 'they are where they are' because they didn't try hard enough? Do we blame them for becoming alcoholics or addicts?

The values our culture projects are sometimes wonderful: generous, welcoming, communal, compassionate. But at times they are envious, self-centered, hard-hearted, prejudiced. If we are Christians, we need discernment, and self-examination, to see which crowd we're running with.

We need the example, the teaching, and the risen power of Jesus Christ to make us what we are called to be. We need his ransoming death to clear us from guilt over not doing all we should for too long. We need to center our lives on the fact that this "blessed Jesus, who comes in the name of the Lord" can set us free from the grip of a "me-obsessed"

culture, so that we can serve other people, just as he serves us.

Let us pray...