

A Passion Week Welcome
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A Passion Week Welcome Matthew 21:1-11

It is Palm Sunday. Our Lord arrives. Yet Jesus does not enter as we expect, not as we would like him to approach. Today we mark the end of Lent; we make final preparations to commemorate Jesus' passion. Our work during Lent has been to clear the spiritual path so that his presence in, and with us, may become more recognizable. As we hear the story of his entry into Jerusalem, we must reflect on what it really means to welcome Jesus into this Passion Week.

The narrative leading up to Jesus' triumphal entry, is an awkward mix of his instruction on the nature of the kingdom of heaven, and the disciples' misunderstandings and jockeying for power. Jesus teaches them to become like children in their faith, but they fight like children for their master's favor. Jesus tells them that the kingdom is about suffering and service, and then they ask to be first in glory. Peter asks about the limits of forgiveness, only to be told that he must forgive from the heart without limits. The rich young man approaches Jesus hoping the kingdom is about *doing*, only to find that it is about *emptying*.

This awkwardness bleeds over into today's text as Jesus enters Jerusalem. The crowd traveling with him sets up a king's entry, but Jesus comes in on a donkey. Others go to purchase their sacrifices, but Jesus walks in, pronounces judgment on those buying and selling, challenges the priests and scribes, and then leaves the city for the evening. One thing is clear: Jesus does not come to us on our terms. He appears on his own terms.

Yet, he does draw near. Jesus could have resisted this royal procession, but he permits it, even participates in it. He comes on a donkey instead of riding in on a warhorse, yet he moves toward us. Although there is a great deal of misunderstanding involved in this parade, Jesus still allows them to offer him praise. So there is a bit of a dance going on here, isn't there? How do we welcome our king this week without falling into the trenches of misunderstanding?

We cannot expect, with the crowd, a glorious assumption of military, political, or religious power. Jesus clearly means to suffer and serve rather than to rule and reign in a worldly way. We must not, however, sit back and critically second-guess the incorrect expectations of the crowd—that is not a helpful view of this passage, and it certainly is no way to welcome our Lord.

Instead, let us consider afresh what Jesus' entry means. Jesus has arrived as Jerusalem's king to bring salvation, but salvation means more than relief from an oppressive regime. Jesus enters Jerusalem to free the people from themselves. You see, the oppressive Roman state is not the only thing wrong with this picture. In fact, political liberation does not even seem to be on Jesus' radar. Those who suffer often fail to see beyond their immediate complaints. Oppression can be overwhelming, but it is just one small symptom of a fallen world.

Jesus comes to make many wrong things right, and he does not overwhelm military power with greater military power in order to do it. Jesus comes to bring salvation from oppression . . . and from shame, hate, selfishness, greed, fear, death, lust, and anything else that corrupts God's creation.

Jesus' salvation reaches far beyond our urgent, gnawing needs. He does not simply bow to us and our needs; Jesus saves us from the shortsightedness of our own perceived needs.

Jesus' entry also signifies divine judgment. We pretend that it is only those religious leaders who are being judged, but Jesus' judgment falls on us all. We are so often misguided that we contribute more to the problem than to the solution. Our desires lead us far from celebrating Jesus' kind of kingdom, so his judgment also falls on us. In this sense, Jesus' coming to town is not good news to us. It thwarts our own plans for salvation.

What we often resist seeing about the kingdom is that every step of the way Jesus must wrestle with his own people and their agendas. Resistance to the way of peace, self-sacrifice, and service is so strong that his own disciples will eventually desert him, and his own people will murder him. The folks in this story do not prefer God's way, and sometimes neither do we. Now, no one wants to think about the differences between the divine way and our way on Palm Sunday, when a crowd happily fills the streets and the singing of "*Hosanna*" fills the air.

But if we truly seek to prepare the way of the Lord, and if we really want to follow Jesus' footsteps, we must prepare our own hearts by accepting God's evaluation of our intentions and plans. Otherwise we stand in the way when Jesus enters.

Friends, let us allow God to break down our resistance and bring us into the kingdom. Here are a few practical ways to follow Jesus this week: *Offer forgiveness freely and from the heart.* It may be that you have been withholding forgiveness from someone who has deeply offended you. Or perhaps you need to work on forgiving those little everyday offenses that creep up. Become a forgiver, without keeping count, as Jesus instructed Peter.

If you love money or possessions, as did the rich man who approached Jesus, *let go of your money,* or stop obsessing so much over it that you spend too much time holding on to what you think is yours.

There are other practical ways to welcome Jesus as well. *Be a peacemaker; love and pray for your enemies; go an extra mile with someone; stop striving to be first or best or most powerful.* You may say that these practical instructions amount to being nice to others and being a good person but carry very little spiritual weight. We would all prefer merely to *contemplate the mystery* of God's coming near and follow Jesus' journey with a spiritual devotion to the suffering servant.

It is true that many of these instructions don't seem spiritual in themselves. We must do them, not because of their own spiritual weight, but out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

Somehow this practical work done with spiritual attention prepares the way of the Lord as nothing else can. It changes us. It makes room in our hearts that Jesus can fill with the kingdom of heaven. This is the way to make straight the path of the Lord: *self-emptying.* There is no other way to let Jesus' message sink in, and there is no other way to follow our Lord than to walk in his footsteps.

Jesus' life was one of self-emptying and service to God and humanity, and so we make our lives in his likeness. If there was ever a week to get this right, this is it. If there was ever a point in the Christian narrative to step out of the way, and let

the story of divine love continue this is it. Let his work be the homage you pay to the king as he enters. Allelujah. Amen.