

# The Tragedy of the Triumphal Entry

## Matthew 21:1-17

**Introduction** Everyone loves a parade! The crowds who line the streets of the streets of New York for the Macy's Parade and of Pasadena for the Rose Parade vibrate with the fun and the happiness of carefree children. The floats covered in gorgeous flowers move their stately way down the street to the fading in and fading away sound of the best marching bands in the country. Even the simple parades of painted plywood forms moving down the street on straw covered flatbeds can draw crowds if there's music and shouting and loud fire engines sirens.

And we really love these parades when they honor those whose achievements are great. We have all seen the pictures or watched in person the snow of confetti on the shoulders of athletes and astronauts and for some, triumphant soldiers. There is a sense of excitement and unified acclaim that surges in the blood.

And so it was on a warm spring day in Palestine 2000 years ago. The preparation that led up to that parade and the loud acclaim and high hosannas have all been recorded for us in the text we read a few moments ago. New York may have its Macy's Parade and Pasadena its Rose Parade, but Jerusalem had its triumphal entry.

### The Coming in Triumph

(Matthew 20:29-21:11)

Matthew's narrative of this triumphal entry does not really begin in Matthew 21. It begins earlier. You see, this parade really starts at Jericho, to the north east of Jerusalem. Jesus was in this city and there a crowd had gathered for his teaching and miracles and hope. As He left the city to begin His way to Jericho, the crowd follows Him. (v.29) So here is this large group of people walking along the road headed towards Jerusalem. It begins with a talk on the trail in 20:17-19. As they are going up to Jerusalem, Jesus is emphatic about what his future holds: rejection, pain, a cruel death and a resurrection. But the disciples are more concerned about their own place and position in the Kingdom (v.20-28). Notice the time word in verse 20, "then". Then, as Jesus is talking about His own cross His followers are concerned about their own crowns. They do not understand the present priority of His redemptive work – they want Him to get on with the ruling.

### The Gathering of the Crowd

(v.29-34)

Along the way they encounter two blind men. They hear that it is Jesus who is going by. And they begin to shout, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David." (v.30). It was so loud that it drew the attention of crowd who tried to hush them. And in stubborn faith and holding hard to hope, they call out even more, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Jesus turns to respond, "What do you want me to do for you?" interesting question isn't it? Jesus' question is not to get information but rather to draw out self-examination. In what way do they want the mercy of God?

Notice their response again, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened." And Jesus' great heart moves His sovereign power and healing hand and they immediately can see. Now they join the crowd and follow Jesus. I don't imagine that it was solemn! It seems to me that souls and eyes once blind but given sight now cause hearts and mouths to sing and shout and praise. I bet the noise of their awe and thankfulness was greater than the noise of their pleas for mercy.

Now I want to ask a question: is Matthew just giving us a sort of running snap shot on these hours, or are the details of these events all a part of Matthew's argument? I believe that Matthew brings these events in for good reason. Note something: these two blind men repeatedly addressed Jesus as Lord. In their physical blindness they saw something that most of the seeing people around them were blind to. "Lord, have mercy" (v.30) is repeated in verse 31. And when Jesus extends the hand of mercy, He is still addressed as "Lord" (v.33). And as "Son of David" there is, for Matthew, a recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. I get that from Matthew 1:1 where Matthew opens his gospel this way, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham." The blind men of Matthew 9:27 know Him as the "Son of David." And the crowds, after seeing the demon-possessed blind man delivered and healed in Matthew 12:22-23, wonder if this could be the "Son of David." Then the pagan Canaanite woman whose daughter was cruelly demonized, begged crumbs from the table in the words of Matthew 15:22, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David."

So all through the Gospel of Matthew, people blinded by sin and Satan who recognize Jesus as the Lord, the Son of David, receive mercy and sight and help and hope fulfilled.

## The Fulfilling of Prophecy

## Matthew 21:1-7

So here is the crowd making their way along the Roman road between Jericho and Jerusalem. They come to Bethphage just outside Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives. Here Jesus seems to pause, maybe for a rest. Now is the time for a word of scripture to be fulfilled.

He sends two disciples to go to a village nearby. There they will find a donkey and colt. They are to loose them and bring them back. You can just see the eyebrows go up. "What is the owner going to say? Won't people think we are just stealing them?" Matthew records the words of Jesus and gathers them up into his argument. "If anyone questions you say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them."

Now why does He do this? Why is He going to enter Jerusalem on this day in this way? Because the Scriptures had foretold it in Zechariah 9:9. Matthew is careful to point out that once again, Jesus is who He claimed to be because all through His life, significant events and actions and words are what the Old Testament had pointed to.

Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of what Zechariah pointed to. This is true not only of verse 9, but of the whole chapter. Immediately what follows in verse 10-17 is the salvation of God's people and the rule and reign of the King over all people groups as a result of His redemptive work. Matthew has carefully chosen this text in order to follow what he has just written beginning in verse 17 about his impending crucifixion and the disciples argument over position and place.

Two things stand out in Jesus' fulfilling of this text:

- Jesus is coming to Zion as the King. This is the Lord, the Son of David, the King who is coming. This is not just anyone; this is the King. This is not only a King, but He is the King. He is the One illuminated by all the search lights of the Old Testament.
- Jesus is not coming in the way they expect. Yes the Old Testament had clearly pointed to this event. But Israel was expecting a King who would come with crowning pomp and conquering power. They looked for a King who would be majestic and would overthrow their enemies. They were looking for a glorious King coming in triumph, not a humble King coming "not to be served, but to serve give His life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

Why the difference? Because in Zechariah 9:9, this King's coming brings justice and salvation. The humbleness of this King's coming means that He is coming endowed with salvation.

### The Entering of the King

(v.8-9)

Ah, the crowds sense a parade! They begin to cut off the palm branches and lay out their coats along the way. As the procession moves down the road and into the city, it is ringing with gladness and rushing praise. The crowds go ahead and prepare the way. Loud are shouts and great is the noise of their celebration.

The heart of their celebration is a quote from Psalm 118. "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord." But I want you to turn there with me and look at something. Matthew points us through this phrase to this Psalm so that we might understand what is really going on here.

Psalm 118:22-29.

Here are those familiar words of a rejected stone becoming the chief cornerstone. This is what God is doing and it is wonderful. So which is it in this text? Is it possible that right in the midst of quoting a text and shouting high and acclaiming phrase of worship and adoration that they are rejecting the stone?

### The Thinking of the People

(v.10-11)

What is it that these people who are praising Jesus really thinking? Matthew shows us in their answer to those who question them about the parade. "Who is this?" rises from the lips from people stirred (or disturbed) by all the hoopla.

And these crowds who from Jericho to Jerusalem have lifted long and loud hosannas to Jesus reply, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee." Here in these words is the tragedy of the triumphal entry. Here are men and women who have heard pleas for mercy from the Lord, the Son of David. They have heard Him tell His disciples that the Lord needs them. And Matthew tells us that this event is that of the King coming.

But that is not what they say. They don't say, "Here is the Lord. Here is the Son of David. Here is our King." They only see a prophet. Yes, He is. But beloved, only seeing Jesus as a prophet when He must be seen as the supreme Lord and sovereign King is a tragedy. Theirs may not be a wrong answer, but it is an insufficient answer.

And so it can be with us. It is possible to affirm that Jesus is a great teacher, the prophet of God, the great Biblical Counselor, the provider of our needs, the object of our joy and still not have a saving faith. It is possible to join in with throngs of enthusiastic worshippers and sing hosanna praises from Scripture texts. But it is insufficient unless we have come to see that Jesus is Lord and King and Sovereign. It is possible in all our great claims to *see* that we really are *blind*.

So where do we go from here? We go to the Temple

## The Confrontation in the Temple (v.12-17)

Jesus makes a turn. It is for some an unexpected turn. Shouldn't He now present His authority at the palace? No, He will go the Temple. God has always ruled His people from His house. It may have been from a tent in the wilderness. It may have been from a fabulous Temple in Jerusalem. It may be from the glory of heaven. And He will one day in the New heavens and earth be its Temple. Jesus always rules, not from a palace, but from the Temple.

### The Condition of the Temple (v.12)

Look at what Jesus found in the place of worship. There was buying and selling and trading. There was the graft and greed of money-changing. Here priests and people had made rules and added them to the Word. People here could buy their sacrifice rather than bring it. They had to give in Temple money so they had to exchange their Roman coins for Jewish issue.

And Jesus goes in, for at least the second time in three years, overturning tables and driving out those doing these evil things. This is an interesting contrast that Matthew is drawing. Jesus is coming under the acclaim and praise of men with humbleness and meekness. Yet He rises with zealous wrath against the sin and wicked violation of His Father's house.

### The Cause for His Actions (v.13)

Jesus defends His actions by a quote from the Word. On the surface, He is cleansing the Temple because they had perverted its purpose. God wanted it for a place to pursue God; they had turned it into a place to pursue wealth. As we well know, these are mutually exclusive options. You cannot serve God and money.

But go back to the text Jesus is quoting here and look how Matthew gathers it up into this own argument.

Isaiah 56:6-8

“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.” [ESV]

Here is the great reason for Jesus' zeal. The house of God was not just for Israel, but would be a place where all the people groups could gather. How then could Israel profane this great house of prayer which was for all the nations?

You see, Matthew has been showing all through this book why the gospel is to all the world. He is basically answering the question posed by the Jews, "What happened?" Here is what happened. Israel had rejected her King and profaned His house and would eventually drive Him to the cross. This was not unforeseen, but rather was the unfolding of God's eternal plan to save for Himself men and women, boys and girls from all the people groups. These He will build together into a Temple, a corporate habitation for the Spirit of God.

### The Challenge to His Glory

(v.14-17)

In the Temple we see the true state of Israel represented by the Pharisees. They can see all the wonderful things Jesus has done in healing the blind and the lame. They can hear the sweet praises from children's lips. In all this instead of acknowledging Jesus, they are indignant.

Jesus' response to them is to quote from Psalm 8:2

**Psalm 8:1-2**

O LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouth of babes and infants,  
you have established strength because of your foes,  
to still the enemy and the avenger. [ESV]

The majestic glory of God is so great that praise has been ordained from the mouth of children. If Israel will not acknowledge Him, then God will raise up even children to recognize and acclaim His great fame.

This text ends with Jesus leaving the city. The day of the triumphal entry ends with Jesus outside.

**Conclusion** Well, this gives us much to think about. Matthew presses the horizon of his argument all the way to the end of the chapter. Notice verses 45-46. Even the Pharisees would not seize Jesus because it was clear to them that the people thought Jesus was a prophet. There is deep irony here. The religious thinking of the people that restrained the Pharisees also condemned the people.

The tragedy of the triumphal entry is quite simple and very deadly. It is in not acknowledging that Jesus Christ is not just a prophet, not just a great religious leader - He is sovereign Lord.

So what about us? Are we, in our own way, following Jesus in the crowd? Are we waving palm branches and singing praises when we have not bowed to Him as King?

And that is God's word to you today. Is Jesus Lord of your life, not just in words, but in real faith that obeys? May we have grace to make it so. May Jesus the King be triumphant in your life.