



## The Untriumphal Entry

MARK 11:1-10

April 17, 2011

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples<sup>2</sup> and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it."<sup>3</sup> If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'" <sup>4</sup>And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. <sup>5</sup>And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" <sup>6</sup>And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. <sup>7</sup>And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. <sup>9</sup>And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! <sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

### Introduction

Mr. Shaw was my high school Calculus teacher. He was a devout Muslim. He fasted and prayed during the month of Ramadan. He taught his children Arabic so they could read the Koran. He had large portions, if not the whole, of the Koran memorized, and insisted there was no more beautiful poetry in the world.

We developed a good relationship. About once a week I'd go chat with him after school. This was all a bit ironic because he ended flunking me my spring semester of Calculus; or, you might more accurately say, I flunked myself!

In any event, I used to talk to him about Christianity and especially Jesus Christ. But I remember him being decidedly uninterested in Jesus; not that he rejected Jesus as a good moral teacher. He just felt, you might say, sorry for Jesus. In fact, he viewed Jesus as a rather unfortunate fellow. He pitied Jesus, because Jesus evidently didn't know how to deal with his enemies.

“He was not like that smart fox, the Prophet Mohammed,” Mr. Shaw used to say. And though wise and good, even a prophet as the Koran itself insists, Jesus was nevertheless hardly strong or courageous; or, at least, he lacked a certain savvy and cleverness because at the end of the day he got himself caught by his enemies and even strung up by them.

For the devout Muslim Mr. Shaw, then, there was very little triumph in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Some inspiring teaching and good ethics, but not much power or strength, and certainly very little that could be called victory.

Human speaking, it's not hard to see why Mr. Shaw saw things this way. Take today's passage from Mark 11:1-11. We refer to it as Jesus' Triumphal Entry. In fact, most of our Bible's label it as such. But, if we're honest, it doesn't look all that triumphant. In fact, you might even say it looks decidedly untriumphant!

### **A Remarkably Untriumphal Entry**

We pick up the thread of the story in Mark 11:1. Jesus has made his way down from Galilee to the ancient city of Jericho (cf. 10:46). And now, on this first day of the week, he sets out for the holy city with his disciples and with a large crowd of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast.

Jerusalem was not all that far from Jericho, about seventeen miles. Jesus and the crowd that traveled with him would have taken a familiar caravan-route that would have passed over the southern side of the Mount of Olives, approaching Jerusalem from the east.

Regardless of the motivations of the crowds in going to Jerusalem, Jesus himself was crystal clear as to his own mission, as well as his identity. So, as they drew near to the city, Jesus began to set things in motion. He's intent on making an open declaration of who he is, though without using words, only actions. And so he first instructs two of his disciples to do something highly suggestive and symbolic:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately’ (vv. 1-3).

Fascinating instructions; and, fascinatingly, we must admit, the two disciples whom Jesus chose, in turn, obey their teacher's instruction and go and find the colt just where he said it would be and bring it back to Jesus.

And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let

them go. And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it (vv. 4-7).

Everything seems to be falling into place; and then the crowds begin to catch wind of what's going on. They no doubt see the prophetic significance of Jesus' actions; what could have been more obvious than this miracle worker from Galilee mounting a colt and riding into Jerusalem. This is all like flashing neon lights! Jesus is declaring himself to be Israel's Messianic King; and this his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Thus, they respond accordingly, with loud acclamations and the waving of palm branches to honor royalty; they even take the words of Psalm 118 to their lips in antiphonal praise to celebrate his coming:

And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" (vv. 8-10).

This is all highly prophetic; Jesus' actions here speaking louder than his words. And who could have missed the significance. Who would have failed to connect the dots between this prophet from Nazareth and the prophecy of Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

It seems, of course, that the crowds get it. In fact, in their enthusiasm they appear to crown Jesus by the acclamation and praise. Yet, notice, it's all very short lived. In fact, notice how the day ends. "And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve" (v. 11).

Listen: There's no more anti-climactic moment in the Bible than this moment; in fact, there's no more anti-climactic moment in all of human history! (It's like getting to the top of a wooden roller coaster, only to take a gentle turn and head back into the loading station.) How easily the Hosannas stop ringing, as though someone forgot to press the repeat button! And how seemingly easily the crowds dissipate, as though something more important was vying for their attention, like an evening meal or a conversation with a friend or a good night's sleep! And so Jesus appears to be left all alone, with the Twelve.

He was silent and sad among this excited multitude, the marks of the tears He had wept over Jerusalem still on His cheek. It is not so, that an earthly King enters His City in triumph; not so, that the Messiah of Israel's expectation would have gone into His Temple. He spake not, but only looked round about upon all

things, as if to view the field on which He was to suffer and die. And now the shadows of evening were creeping up; and, weary and sad, He once more returned with the twelve disciples to the shelter and rest of Bethany.<sup>1</sup>

What a stark contrast to other triumphal entries of the time. The Jewish historian, Josephus, describes the triumphal entry of the Roman Emperor Vespasian into the capital city of Rome. Listen for the contrast with Jesus' own entry into Jerusalem:

Amidst such feelings of universal goodwill, those of higher rank, impatient of awaiting him, hastened to a great distance from Rome to be the first to greet him. Nor, indeed, could any of the rest endure the delay of meeting, but all poured forth in such crowds—for to all it seemed simpler and easier to go than to remain—that the very city then for the first time experienced with satisfaction a paucity of inhabitants; for those who went outnumbered those who remained. But when he was reported to be approaching and those who had gone ahead were telling of the affability of his reception of each party, the whole remaining population, with wives and children, were by now waiting at the road-sides to receive him; and each group as he passed, in their delight at the spectacle and moved by the blandness of his appearance, gave vent to all manner of cries, hailing him as 'benefactor,' 'saviour,' and 'only worthy emperor of Rome.' The whole city, moreover, was filled like a temple, with garlands and incense. Having reached the palace, though with difficulty owing to the multitude that thronged around him, he offered sacrifices of thanksgiving for his arrival to the household gods. The crowds then betook themselves to festivity and, keeping feast by tribes and families and neighbourhoods, with libations prayed God that Vespasian might himself long be spared to the Roman empire, and that the sovereignty might be preserved unchallenged for his sons and their descendants throughout successive generations. And, indeed, the city of Rome, after this cordial reception of Vespasian, rapidly advanced to great prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to the Emperor Vespasian's, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem looks decidedly untriumphant, doesn't it?

But not only was his entry rather untriumphant, but consider his final week! It was even worse: misunderstanding, rejection, betrayal, murder. What could be less triumphant than that—execution alongside a couple of known crooks!

To take a more contemporary example: Compare Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with America's entry into Iraq. If we would have entered into Baghdad the way Jesus did

---

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah*, p. 731.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, VII.67-74.

Jerusalem, it would have been like then-President George Bush himself riding a bicycle into the middle of downtown Baghdad, only to get captured, tortured, and then mercilessly executed in broad daylight.

### **Triumph through the Untriumphal**

What's so triumphal, then, about Jesus' triumphal entry? In what way is this a triumph, if we should even call it a triumph? For it certainly doesn't look like the triumphs with which we're all familiar: military triumphs, political triumphs, athletic triumphs.

Where's the triumph?! It's there, but it's only there for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

*For, you see, Jesus triumphed, first of all, by resisting the temptation to turn aside from the way of the cross.* Do you realize that at any moment Jesus *could have* turned aside from the way of the cross? And that at many moments he no doubt would have wanted to—and would have been severely tempted to, not least by Satan himself? Yet he went all the way to the cross. I suspect each day the cross drew nearer the burden of the cross became heavier, so that Jesus was nearly crushed under the weight of its judgment. By going to the cross, he was able to deal with sins. How difficult the task; every step closer became weightier. So tempting to have wanted to set the burden down!

*But Jesus triumphed, secondly, by delivering humanity from a debt we could never pay.* By not turning aside from the way of the cross, Jesus loved his people to the uttermost by dying in their stead and for their sins.

Have you ever been in serious debt and then had that debt somehow paid off in full. I'm talking about the kind of debt that wakes you up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat; it causes you to run the numbers over and over again in your mind, trying to find a way to get out of the unbearable weight of debt.

This is the universal predicament of fallen man: a weight or burden of debt out from under which no one can ever get. In Colossians, Paul calls this "the record of debt" that stands against us with its legal demands. Sin incurs debt, a debt we owe to God. And unless it is paid, the legal demand is death. "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

But, as the Bible says, this record of debt has been set aside, done away with, by nailing it to the cross (Col. 2:14). Paul then interprets Jesus' liberating us from the burden of debt this way: "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Col. 2:15).

*Jesus triumphed, thirdly, by leaving wide open the door of mercy.* You see, verse 11 could have read so much differently. It's an allusion to Malachi 3 and could very well have read like that. "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; . . . But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" (Mal. 3:1-2).

I'm embarrassed to say that I have on more than one occasion nearly missed planes. The attendant who scans your ticket smiles and welcomes you aboard, while under her breath she says to you, "You're getting in by the skin of your teeth, buddy." The door should

have been shut. But someone showed me mercy, and I got to go through the door and get onto the plane.

Each time I slide through a still-open door onto a plane that should have already left, I'm grateful for mercy. So, too, all the more, what Jesus has done is left wide open the door of mercy. He is not slow in fulfilling his promises to wrap things up; instead, he's patient toward you, toward the world, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

However, it must be said that the door of mercy will one day be closed. "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Pet. 3:10). And then it will be forever closed to those who are outside.

None of us knows when this will be; for that day will come suddenly and unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, the Bible says (2 Pet. 3:10; 1 Thess. 5:2). But for now, as long as it is called Today, the door of mercy remains wide open!

### **Seeing Triumph in the Untriumphant**

You see, then, the triumphal entry is as triumphant as Good Friday is good. Its triumph in weakness and humility; triumph in patience and mercy. This isn't the kind of triumph the world understands. Like my high school Calculus teacher, the world understands the triumph of strength and power and victory, even when it's self-serving.

But the triumph of Jesus is not that kind of triumph; in fact, it's not the kind of triumph the world *can even see*, much less savor as beautiful or precious. For, as the Apostle Paul has said, none of the rulers of this age understood Jesus' triumphant mission, "for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). That's the proof of their lack of understanding the wisdom of God: they executed the Lord of glory himself.

Not much has changed these last two thousand years; the rulers of this age still don't get it. And, in fact, in many ways, we ourselves have trouble truly getting it. There is something so counterintuitive to the Son of Man coming, not to be served, but to serve and to offer his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). We understand lords who lord it over their people. But a God who becomes obedient to death, even death on a cross! Who could conceive of such a thing.

This is why we only see the triumph of what Jesus has done when we are *cured of our blindness*. Just like blind Bartimaeus. Jesus bumped into him on the morning of his triumphal entry, as he left the city of Jericho. You know, it's not only fascinating, but highly instructive that the only person who saw what was going on with Jesus was a blind man. The rest of the people, even Jesus' own disciples, couldn't see what was happening. In fact, in John's gospel this is made explicit: "His disciples did not understand these things at first" (John 12:16).

But the blind beggar Bartimaeus, he had eyes to see and ears to hear. There he sat just outside the city gate of Jericho on the morning of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And

when he heard it was Jesus of Nazareth coming by, he lacked neither the insight nor the faith to cry out: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark. 10:47).

The blind man sees what’s going on! Yet those who see don’t: “And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent” (10:48). Blind Bartimaeus knew what he saw, so he cried out all the more fervently, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Oh, that’s the voice of faith! That’s the cry of the heart that’s been given eyes to see! And it caught Jesus’ attention; and he called him, and then healed him, for, as Jesus said, “your faith has made you well” (10:52). “And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way” (10:53).

This is the mystery of the kingdom as it has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. It is not for flesh and blood; it is for those who have, as Jesus himself has said, “eyes to see and ears to hear.”

## Conclusion

See, then, the nature of this blessed kingdom. “Blessed is the coming of the kingdom of our father David.” The kingdom Jesus brings comes in stages; it is first inaugurated in weakness and humility and suffering and death; then it will consummated in glory and power and strength and victory. Jesus first establishes God’s *reign* through his life, death and resurrection; then, when the trumpet sounds, he shall come to fully establish God’s *realm* over the whole of creation, at which point everything will be made righteousness and unrighteousness will be eradicated (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13).

See, then, as well, the character of this king. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” How blessed and meek and lowly is this Suffering Servant we call Jesus of Nazareth. “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:8-9). But not forever, for he will come again with a different visage. He will come again, not as a Lamb for the slaughter, but as a Lion bringing judgment and victory in his hand.

And, finally, see how the door of salvation remains open for you. Today is the day of salvation. In fact, the last two thousand years of human history have been an expression of God’s great kindness and forbearance and patience, which is meant to lead you to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

So, don’t loiter around; it’s time to enter into God’s saving grace. Don’t be like Mr. Shaw, who misunderstood Jesus’ identity and mission; instead, be like blind Bartimaeus, who cried out to King Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Amen.