

Matthew 21:12-45
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (March 29, 2026)

There is excitement in the festive air. It's jubilation time. The sound all around is loud and hardly muffled by the dust: crowds commenting on the beauty of the City of David and the surrounding landscape, children chasing each other, heavy feet crunching the dirt road, vendors calling attention to their carts, customers checking for bargains, caravans of visitors inquiring about room vacancies.

And then a shout filled with messianic hope, "Hosannah to the Son of David!" followed by another more daring cry, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and by yet another, "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Other people in the background sound a concerned warning: "Quiet, there may be spies of Rome. Look, soldiers are all around!" Others, confused, wondered: "Who is this?" Some, not believing their eyes, responded, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The scene feels celebratory, but it's actually layered with tension. Jesus enters the city not on a war horse nor in a display of political power, but on a donkey. In doing so, he fulfills an old prophecy.¹ Contrary to popular demand, his

¹ Zechariah 9:9

intention is not to be king the way they expect. His royalty is one rooted in humility and solidarity with ordinary people.

The risk of misinterpreting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is still pretty high, though. It can easily be seen as a victory march and communicate a sense of redemption and vindication. It can stir bold feelings and encourage a revolt. Matthew's story of Jesus' entry can inspire and delight. With a closer look, it can also surprise and challenge.

The context is the Feast of Passover: diaspora Jews from the surrounding countries have come on pilgrimage to celebrate the "Feast of Freedom," the annually recurring memorial of liberation from slavery and oppression in Egypt obtained by Moses hundreds of years earlier. When that happened, Israel left behind a land of misery and death for a land flowing with milk and honey, the land promised by God to Abraham.²

Pontious Pilate, the Governor appointed by the Roman Emperor, also rides into Jerusalem to remind the Jews that Rome is in charge and they better behave. Roman legions have already quelled many a insurrection. A large assembly of Jews, especially on this holy day, can be the perfect occasion for terrorists and enemies of the state to flare up a new rebellion. At Jesus' entry, "the whole city was in turmoil."

² Exodus 3:8; Genesis 12:1-3.7

Tensions are running high, as are expectations of liberation from the crushing boot of yet another occupying army. Jews yearn greatly for their long-due autonomy. They look forward to the turning of the page of this latest oppressive chapter in their story. They have experienced one domination after another and have now been in the tight grip of Rome for the past 90 years. Their understanding of “salvation” is shaped by their lived oppression. They look forward to the coming of the long-promised Messiah and his kingdom. And what they have heard about Jesus so far gives them expectant hope.

Yet Jesus’ humble entry does not display the trappings of royalty or a military parade. When Matthew speaks of the *humble* king, he refers to a humility that connotes poverty and low status. Taking the lead from Zechariah 9, Matthew implies that this king Jesus is devoted to justice rather than violence and is strong in faith and not armed to the teeth.³ The entry of the afflicted king, familiar with the plight of the poor, starts a week of tension and conflict, of familiar rituals and strange new ones: the Passion Week.

Moreover, for Jesus to come into the city and have people hail him as son of king David is dangerous. Rome’s agents take notice and recognize that when the crowds hail a new hero, they are slapping Rome in the face: all eyes open and all ears perk up.

³ See Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, pp. 27-29

The throngs have followed Jesus into Jerusalem and the air, already charged with an atmosphere of celebration, is now electrified with hopeful and political anticipation. They cry “Hosanna” now, but what will happen in a few days?

Will they, will we do more than sing triumphant hymns? Will they stick around and support him, will we, when he affirms that the Temple of the Lord is a house of prayer for all nations, a pluralism of races, languages and religions with no exceptions? What have they understood of the prophets’ warnings about the tyranny of kings and their abuse of power? Have they fallen in love with the empty promises, the show of force, the dreams of vengeance, the lust of war and the recourse to violence? Will they walk the walk? Will we?

Whom will they side with? Where will we stand? Will we follow ever so closely the humble king come to do justice and to show what love is all about? Will we learn from his dramatic actions that love implies passion and sacrifice?

Must we move so quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, or can we take the time for Lent to do its work? Will we sit at the community table to enjoy his Last Supper on Thursday and let Jesus wash our feet, break bread and pour wine, offer his body and declare: “Do this in memory of me?”

Will we ignore Jesus’ sorrowful and lonely prayer that night in Getsemany, Judas’ betraying kiss, the arrest by a mob, the

soldiers' coward mocking, Peter's three-fold denial, the Sanhedrin's trumped-up accusations, the torture through flogging, the humiliating spitting, the crown of thorns tearing into his flesh, the scoffing by the religious authorities? Will we walk with him the exhausting walk through the streets of Jerusalem carrying the cross all the way to Calvary? Will we dare watch the nailing of his hands and feet to the cross?

Will we stand with his mother, Mary, and the other women at the foot of the cross and witness in anguish his agony and bleeding? Will his anguished words, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" strike us abhorrent? Will we hide in shame or receive in gratitude his sacrificial death on that terrible but powerfully redeeming Friday afternoon? Will we affirm along with the centurion and the soldiers, "Truly this man was God's Son!"?

Will we ignore the tearing of the Temple veil, the earthquake, the opening of tombs and the raising of the dead following his redemptive death on the cross?

As we participate closely in the unfolding of the dramatic events of Jesus' final days let us not assume simplistically that his sacrifice means we are home free with no personal involvement: His love, which attracts us and makes us one with God and one another, requires our active participation. Let us not bypass the suffering moments of his faithfulness

to the Father that brought us freedom. Let us accompany him in his final moments. Amen.