

## **Matthew 21:1-11 Welcome to the King**

### **Introduction**

Who is this? We have all had phone calls where we didn't recognise the person on the other end of the line. Maybe they gave their name but we didn't pick it up and are too embarrassed to admit that we have no idea who they are, despite the fact that they clearly know who we are! Or it may be in the street when someone says hello and uses your name showing their recognition of who you are, but the face is unfamiliar and it is difficult to admit that you have no idea who has greeted you! They are showing their recognition of who you are, but the face is unfamiliar and it is difficult to admit that you have no idea who has greeted you! These are moments we hope do not happen too frequently; we fear that they might get labelled 'senior moments' even if our age is still not quite in the aged category! For people who are in the public arena in the course of their work or who have accomplished some great achievements in sport or the Arts or some other field it is not impossible that the other person has seen you on television or attending an event in which you participated but naturally had not seen them in the crowd. In that scenario there is no embarrassment for not knowing the other person.

However, 2,000 years ago on a Spring Sunday morning similar ignorance was displayed on the outskirts of Jerusalem by the local residents who had no idea who the person was who was riding into their city on a donkey. Jesus had been to Jerusalem at least once a year for the past eighteen years, but these people had never taken the trouble to find out more about him. What about you and me – have you taken time to stop and think of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth for your own life today? There are many people who have heard about Jesus in general terms, but never stopped to think deeply about who He is or the claims He makes on our lives. In the midst of the celebrations of the Passover Festival the large numbers of people who witnessed this scene had an opportunity to ask some questions and to reflect on Jesus' identity. In the first instance to find out who this person is whom others are acclaiming as a special king or Messiah. Then to examine His claims about His identity to see if they stand up to scrutiny; most important of all to reflect on what implications there might be for our lives today; do I have a response to make to Him? It was the start of an extraordinary week in the life and ministry of Jesus that would end the following Sunday evening with more amazing celebrations, but in between were events that changed human history with respect to our relationship with God. Have you welcomed the king into your life?

### **1. A Command from Jesus** (Matthew 21:1-3)

*As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away" (Matthew 21:1-3). Bethphage was on the outskirts of Jerusalem, separated from the city by the steep Kidron Valley. The route over the Mount of Olives was the normal route taken by people approaching Jerusalem from the East. Jewish traditions of that era suggested that pilgrims who could walk to Jerusalem for the major festival should attempt to do so, rather than taking a more comfortable form of transport. Jesus had come many miles to the city and was fit and healthy and did not need assistance for the short trip into the capital city. Jesus had a clear purpose that day for entering the city in this particular way. Galilee, for a number of years, had been the home of numerous rumours that the Messiah would soon appear in their midst. He had to be a man who would lead them to visit over the hated Romans. Various individuals had put their names*

forward as possible candidates, but their rapid demise brought only more crushing discouragement to these passionate Jewish people. Much ink has been used in writing about whether Jesus had made a prior arrangement with the householder in Bethany for the loan of his donkey. Some people are naturally more welcoming or generous with others –our faces can sometimes give that away! We will never know, because the Jewish law did allow royalty or rabbis to borrow a donkey for a short journey on condition it was returned later that day in the same condition in which it had been borrowed. Was this a generous man who made other people welcome at his home or was he particularly welcoming to Jesus? What about you and me –how welcoming are we to the claims of Jesus on our lives?

Here two unnamed followers of Jesus were sent to carry out a task by Jesus. Did they understand the significance of what they were doing at the time? I doubt it. What is clear that as disciples they were obedient to their master and did as He requested. It was only later, probably after the Christian Church began, that they put all the pieces together and grasped what Jesus was doing that day. In our lives and service for God we too will live in a certain way and make particular choices that we may not see the significance of at the time. It may be that observing a constant Christian witness is a significant pointer for another person in coming to know Jesus for themselves. It may be how you conduct yourself in the workplace in not participating in unhelpful gossip or inappropriate vocabulary or how you work just as hard in the manager's absence as in their presence that another person notices and silently appreciates. It is so often not the words we say that count most but the example of a life lived with consistency to the faith we profess. There is a place for words and we should pray for that opportunity to point people to the Lord Jesus, but words are much more powerful when backed up by a life that is lived to the glory of God. Jesus was consciously modelling a way of life for His followers and invites us to follow Him.

## **2. The Message from the Prophets (Matthew 21:4-5)**

<sup>4</sup>*This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:*<sup>5</sup>*"Say to the Daughter of Zion' See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Matthew 21:4-5). The major events in Jesus' life were not accidents but rather part of God's plan and purpose for His time on earth. It is thought that Matthew had two passages of the Bible in mind when he made this reference to the Old Testament. (a) **The Coming of the King** (Zechariah 9:9) First of all, the more familiar one in Zechariah 9:9: *Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey...* It refers directly to the Jewish people –their Saviour was coming into the city. The question for them was this: would they recognise Him? Not in the sense of would they know His name, but would they receive Him as their Saviour? *Daughter of Jerusalem* [or Zion] simply means 'resident of Jerusalem' in more plain speech. They had looked down on Jesus because He was from Galilee. In John 8:52 Nicodemus was challenging for commending Jesus to some other Jewish leaders in the capital city: *Look into it and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.* In the same way when the Christian Church began on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem one of the criticisms of the new movement was this: *Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?* It was as if there was profound shock that God might use this particular ethnic group! The assumption was that their particular ethnic identity disqualified them from bringing an important message from God. However, God has always delighted in using ordinary people to accomplish His goals and carrying out His work. Paul made this plain in these words to the Church at Corinth. *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of**

noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before Him (I Corinthians 1:26-29). Here on Palm Sunday it was the prophet from Galilee who witnessed through His actions to the purposes of God that were fulfilled before their eyes. Notice the pattern on Easter Sunday morning, a week later; who were the first eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection? It was of course a group of women, whom the same residents of Jerusalem would not accept as valid witnesses in a court of law because a woman's witness was not considered equal to that of a man. God was making a point here about welcoming the marginalised whom He accepts. This followed God's choice of two Galilean teenagers as mother and step-father respectively for Jesus when He came into the world. No wonder that Mary in her song of praise uttered these words: *My soul glorifies the Lord* <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, <sup>48</sup> for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. (Luke 1:46b-47). It was not merely her being humble, though she was, but an accurate recognition of the unlikeliness of God choosing her to carry out this particular calling. God delights in using ordinary people to serve Him? Are you available to live for Him? Have you put your faith and trust in Him? There is no better time than the present to make such a response.

(b) **The Message to the Nations (Isaiah 62:11)** a less familiar passage: *The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your Saviour comes! See, His reward is with Him, and His recompense accompanies Him;'"* " The event of that first Palm Sunday was not only for the people present in that geographical location, it was also for the people of every other nation on the planet. It was a gospel for the world. God had spoken, but would the Gentiles heed His call? God had spoken but who would take His message so that the nations could hear the proclamation? The apostle Paul, after rejoicing in the wonder of the gospel, put it like this in Romans 10:14-15: <sup>14</sup>How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? <sup>15</sup>And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" This challenge was put to first century AD followers of Jesus –they responded by taking the gospel to every major urban centre in the Roman world within a generation. It comes afresh to us –what am I doing? What are you doing to take the gospel to Broughty Ferry or Monifieth or...whatever place we wish to include as part of our calling? Are we willing to be part of the answer to our prayers in passing on the good news?

### **3. The Obedience from the Disciples** (Matthew 21:6-7)

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.* <sup>7</sup>They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them (Matthew 21:6-7). The word disciple means a 'learner' –someone under instruction. We are familiar with cars with the red 'L' plates attached. This signals that we ought to take more care as the driver in front of us is under instruction. There is a second 'green plate' that some newly qualified drivers have attached to their cars. It signals to us that the driver in question has passed the tests, but is conscious that they need to build up their experience at driving under a wider range of road conditions than was required for the road test. As Christians, disciples of Jesus, we have come by faith to place our trust in Him; we may have been baptised and given public testimony to our faith, but the longer we have been walking with Jesus the more conscious we become of our shortcomings and those areas of our lives where further progress is needed. Sadly this is not true of all Christians. There are some who are content to remain 'spiritual babes'; instead of reading and studying their Bibles for themselves and with others in a Bible study group they are content simply to hear the Word of God expounded from the pulpit without seriously

seeking to apply what they have heard to their own lives and to pass it on to other people. The disciples whom Jesus can use are the men and women and young people who are available to be used by Him. This is a basic fact, but also a profoundly important one. A disciple is willing to serve. Are you involved in some ministry in our local church? There is a need for us all to be involved in some of the many forms of service for the Lord. Much of this service is behind the scenes, but it is as important as those roles and tasks that are more visible and in the public eye. These followers of Jesus were willing here to be witnesses for Him. The residents of Jerusalem as well as the pilgrims from Galilee and elsewhere in the Roman world would be aware that these people were following Jesus. They were not only engaged in evangelistic witness, but also in practical care. They placed their coats on the donkey to provide comfort to the animal and the equivalent of a saddle for Jesus. It was a small thing here that they had done, but it was what was needed. Serving on a rota for a variety of things in the church, or working as a leader in one of the organisations or whatever it may be is vital for the overall work of the Church, for the good of all ages of people in our family and community. Likewise in our planned financial giving we are contributing to His work (I Corinthians 16:1-2) May God direct us as to where we should serve and when, not if or whether....! He has a ministry for every one of His children to exercise.

#### **4. The Response from the Crowds (Matthew 21:8-11)**

(a) **The Rejection** (Matthew 21:10-11) *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"<sup>41</sup> The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."* The local people were surprised and a bit cynical about these Galileans –some Scots might compare it to Edinburgh and Glasgow with some residents of the east looking down on their poorer fellow-Scots from the west. As an Englishman I might hear such things, but couldn't possibly comment on such inter-city rivalries! Yet may it never be so amongst God's people. There is level ground at the foot of the cross. What was the response here? *the whole city was stirred* (the word is the root from which we get 'seismic' in our English language, a word associated with earthquakes. They could not ignore Jesus, but being emotionally stirred is insufficient it needs to lead to concrete action. With too many of these onlookers it did not get beyond that initial openness to find out more about the prophet from Galilee. As a result Luke tells us in Luke 19:41-44 these words concerning Jesus: *As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it<sup>42</sup> and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day **what would bring you peace**—but now it is hidden from your eyes.<sup>43</sup> The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.<sup>44</sup> They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, **because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.**"* What a tragic situation of lost opportunities. These people were quite religious but never came to terms with the claims of Jesus.

(b) **The Acceptance** (Matthew 21:8-9) *A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.<sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"* Hosanna means 'save us'. It was a declaration that Jesus was the Messiah, the person the Old Testament was speaking about. Yet were they really accepting what Jesus was offering to them? In John 6, after the feeding of the 'Five Thousand' there was an emotion response by many of these Galilean people: *After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."<sup>15</sup> Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself (John 6:14-15). They were referring back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me **from** among**

*your own brothers. You must listen to him.* (This prophecy makes it plain that the man in question will be Jewish, ruling out a variety of claimants like Mohammed in Islam, for example). Peter in Acts 3:22 makes it plain that this is a clear reference to Jesus. How genuine was the profession of faith of these Galilean pilgrims? It was easy to utter these praises in a crowd of many tens of thousands. It is not difficult to confess our faith in Jesus in church. However, it is altogether different to do so in the school playground; the office or in some cases our family homes. What is your response to Jesus? He is not asking us to take off our coats and necessarily wave palm branches, but He does want us to come to faith in Him and to tell others about Him and to live and serve in a way that pleases Him. Can He count on you to be one of His followers to witness and to work for Him? I hope so for Jesus' sake, Amen.