

Donkeys, Branches, Crowds, and King
Matthew 21:1-11, John 12:12-17

When Jesus saw the people waving palm branches, I think his heart sank. It's the irony of Palm Sunday: the palm branches spoke of deliverance, but not the deliverance Jesus came to offer. And so John tells us that not even the disciples understood what Palm Sunday was all about until later.

Every so often we realize the Gospel writers are not just historians, that is they do not just report what Jesus said and did, but they are also theologians, that is they describe events in such a way as to present their perspective on God and Jesus.

That's why the four Gospels, even when they report the same incident, report the incident differently. Early on the church toyed with coming up with one Super Gospel if you will, a harmony of all four. But they soon rejected this endeavor, and ended up letting the four Gospels speak with their own voices and perspectives.

Let's keep this in mind on this Palm Sunday, an incident all four Gospels report. But they all agree on few details, which boil down to these: Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the crowds shout

and cheer. Five days later Jesus is dead. Seven days later Jesus is risen from the dead. That's it.

Were it not for the Gospel of John, this would be not be Palm Sunday; it would be called something else, perhaps branch-waving Sunday. Only John mentions palms.

Didn't the crowd put their cloaks on the ground for the donkey to ride upon? Not in John, just palm branches.

But wait, aren't there more details they all agree on? Didn't Jesus make a big deal about finding just the right donkey? Well, Matthew Mark and Luke say so, but in John, Jesus finds the donkey by accident.

And even to say "a donkey" isn't quite agreed to. Matthew has Jesus requiring two donkeys brought to him, and even has Jesus riding both donkeys at once, which would be quite a feat, even for Jesus.

Well, can't we agree the crowds all shout Hosanna? Not in Luke. By the way, Hosanna means "save us now" and in Hebrew the word for Jesus and hosanna are really quite similar. Luke was writing at a time when he was trying to show that Christians were peace-loving people who

were not a threat to the Roman Empire. The demand “save us now” – hosanna – could have been taken as a subversive shout, perhaps, so Luke delicately refrains from mentioning it. . . . And by the way, Jesus was in fact executed as a subversive. . . . only traitors to Rome were hung on crosses, but that’s for another sermon some time.

Well, at least we know the crowds all wave branches of some sort? No, Luke mentions no branches.

And we have four or five hymns in our hymnal telling of children shouting Hosanna as Jesus rides into town. Well, no Gospel says children yelled out as Jesus rode in on the donkey, or donkeys. It is only in Matthew the children cry Hosanna, but it’s not as Jesus is riding, but later, as Jesus cleanses the Temple later that same day.

But in the differences, we are drawn closer to the truth Scripture has for us.

Well, let me center in on just two issues: the number of donkeys and the kind of branches that the crowd waved.

So what about the donkeys? Let me burrow in on this issue. Was it one or two? It can’t be both.

Three Gospels say one donkey, so then is Matthew incorrect? Was he simply misinformed? No, Matthew was a theologian, and we might even say he wrote spiritual truth, beyond literal truth.

Why two donkeys? A mother donkey and offspring? Because over and over again, and here, Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament hopes for a savior, a king.

And in Zechariah 9:9 we read what the new king will be like: he will ride, humbly on a donkey, rather, than, say, a splendid war horse: *Rejoice greatly O daughter of Zion (By the way, “daughter of Zion” does not refer to women, but to the poor and marginalized folk, both men and women, who suffered persecution) your king comes to you triumphant and victorious.. . humble, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

Zechariah was trying to emphasize that the king is on a donkey, yes a donkey, a humble animal. Zechariah writes: a donkey, the colt of a donkey, but Matthew translated the Zechariah passage as the king riding on a donkey AND the colt of donkey, in other words two donkeys, and so that’s how he tells it in the Palm Sunday story.

So, when Matthew talks of two donkeys, he is incorrect factually or literally, but absolutely correct in what really matters: spiritually, or symbolically.

Jesus is the fulfillment; he's the new king bringing forth God's new kingdom. Humble king, a donkey-riding king: Who cares even for the poor, the humble, the outcast, the daughters of Zion. That's truth. And Matthew wants us to understand the truth, and if he adds an extra donkey, the readers in the early church who first read Matthew would have understood this. They were comfortable in thinking in terms of symbolism and parables and such. We must be careful not to impose our 21st century demands of literalism upon first century people, lest we miss the truth. The truth is found not in the number of donkeys, but in what the donkeys mean: a humble king who reaches out even to the lost, the least, those daughters of Zion.

OK. This is Palm Sunday, so let me finally turn more directly to the Palm Branches. Why is it only John who tells us they were palm branches? Perhaps to remind people why the Romans came to be so upset with Jesus.

Let me explain: Religiously, the palm branch was associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, but by Jesus' day it had taken on a powerful political meaning. The palm branch had become an incendiary symbol: it was the symbol of Jewish nationalism and independence. And it inflamed

the Roman authorities as few other symbols could. It was an affront to the political and military power of Rome. The Roman government hated the palm branch as much as the British government hated the Boston Tea Party. It meant insurrection, defiance.

So, as the folks were shouting Jesus, Hosanna, save us now, the palm branches they were waving said, "Save us from Roman oppression. Jesus, drive the Roman soldiers and governor from our city, from our province, become the new king of a new Israel."

And it is in response to the shouts of the crowd, as John tells it, that Jesus finds . . . a donkey to sit upon. And John, who rarely quotes the Old Testament, quotes it here... this phrase we have heard before: do not be afraid, Daughter of Zion, your king is here.

Again, Jesus is king to the daughters of Zion: the least, the lost, the oppressed. He is humble. And he is not come to establish the kind of kingdom the Palm branch wavers were hoping for. Later Jesus will say, My kingdom is not of this world.

John reminds us of this melancholy fact: not even his disciples understood these things at first, but only after Jesus' glorification in cross and Resurrection.

Back to the beginning of the sermon . . . They cheered Jesus with palm branches, thinking he would bring deliverance from Roman oppression. They did not understand he brought deliverance from sin and death. They cheered Jesus with palm branches, thinking he would establish a new political nation of Israel. They did not understand Jesus was bringing a new spiritual kingdom, a kingdom in which everyone has a place, a kingdom marked not by politics and power but by grace and mercy, and eternity.

So, what do we make of Palm Sunday? It's appropriate for us to cheer Jesus. He is our king. It's appropriate to invite the children to come front and center in the cheering and the waving, because Jesus' kingdom belongs to children, too. Jesus' kingdom excludes no one.

Jesus invites us to accept the gifts he does offer. Not earthly wealth, not even freedom from disease or challenge or setback. He's not a king come to give us what we want; he is come to give us what we need: a new life, marked by forgiveness of our sins, and the certain hope of eternal life. He invites us to believe that even as we are sometimes kicked to the curb in our daily lives, that in Jesus' love we find a home, and hope. We are welcomed, we are accepted. If Jesus is to be our king, then Jesus invites us to live according the rules of his kingdom: to live lives that bear witness to mercy and grace and forgiveness and reconciliation.

And so we are struck by the abiding irony of Palm Branches: they bear witness to one kind of kingdom, but not the kingdom Jesus has in mind for us.

The crowd thought the palm branches were the ultimate symbol of a new political and military kingdom that would defeat even the mighty Roman Empire. Little did they know the kingdom of which Jesus is humble and exalted king is not political or military, but rather spiritual. Little did they know the ultimate symbol of this kingdom would be not a palm branch but a cross, and the power of the new kingdom would be marked not by a splendid palace, but an empty tomb. Little did they know the kingdom Jesus brings would ultimately manifest itself not in a capital city of Jerusalem or Rome, but in the church, and in your heart and mine.

On Palm Sunday, the crowd cheers Jesus; but today Jesus does not need our cheering; he needs our hearts, and to quote the hymn: our life, our soul, our all.

Amen.