

PALM SUNDAY, Apr. 2, 2023, Year A

"The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (from Matthew 21:1-11)

- Look at this crowd in James Tissot's painting! *Let's follow their eyes* as they *await* and *greet* Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Two things are obvious about his arrival in the city. We notice the huge and *enthusiastic crowd*. And, we notice *the object of their attention*, Jesus riding on a donkey. At first, we naturally *assume an affinity* between these two things. *The crowd is excited about Jesus precisely because they think he is the answer to their questions. And the apparent solution to their concerns. Who he is* seems to fit neatly with *who they are*, and with where they want to go. *After all*, who wouldn't be happy when *long-nurtured hopes and expectations* are about to be *fulfilled*.
- *As Matthew describes the scene, the crowd responds to Jesus' arrival in two ways, both of which evoke historic precedent.* We learn from 2 Kings about the followers of Jehu. *When they learn he has been anointed king, they spread their cloaks for him to walk on.*¹ And in 2 Maccabees, we learn how Judas Maccabaeus, after defeating Israel's enemies, was greeted upon arriving in Jerusalem.² *The people honored him by waving palm branches in the air.* To clinch the point, Matthew want us to know this: that *when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem*, the crowd's dramatic response was a fulfillment of God's word through the prophet: *"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*³
- Jehu had been commissioned by the prophet Elisha to do something *inherently political*, which had profound historical consequences. Here is what Elisha said to Jehu: *"I anoint you king* over the people of the Lord, over Israel. *You shall strike down* the house of your master Ahab, so that I [the Lord] may *avenge* on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets... *For the whole house of Ahab shall perish...*" *And Judas Maccabaeus was hailed as a great warrior for defeating the forces of a successor to Alexander the Great.* In other words, as Matthew describes Jesus' arrival in the city, the

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crowd's greeting of him suggested a similar hope, that he might vanquish the repressive powers causing God's people to suffer. This Nazarene *might* be the one to make God's Kingdom *present* in their time. (pause)

- It's a common perception these days, to say that '*We all have our own agendas.*' What we mean by this is that *we give priority to our own perceptions and purposes.* We ascribe to political leaders the views we hold ourselves. Our enthusiasm for them can often mask our passion for **our own** concerns. Ironically, this is *one way* we can connect the presidential elections of 2008 and 2016, as different as they may now seem by comparison. *Shaped by a theme in our Gospel reading, I want to stress something important ~ that my comments here are not about the candidates themselves. Instead, I point to how the winning candidates were perceived by others.* Specifically, *in terms of their political views and policies,* both Barack Obama and Donald Trump were *relatively unknown* during their campaigns. *Of course,* Trump was a celebrity figure and TV personality. *But,* even to this day, commentators are *not entirely sure* where his policy commitments lie! Yet, this was also true of Barack Obama when he came onto the national scene, so *slender* was his *prior record* in public office.
- *The point here is* that, two very *different* men still had something in *common*: as candidates, **both Obama and Trump became the objects of extensive personal and political projection.** Partly because their *policy* views were relatively *unknown*, *both men became the objects of a great deal of hope.* And *many people believed that they were the ones who might finally fix our nation's problems and concerns. In time, both men disappointed some of this pent-up hope and expectation.* Like Obama late in his second term, Trump—*early in his first term*—had already faced being *turned-against* by people previously enthusiastic about what they represented. Here, in the careers of two very different Presidents, we see *an insightful parallel.* *They can help us appreciate how Jesus was greeted when he arrived in Jerusalem,* and in how he was viewed soon after. For, like them, Jesus was the object of an immense amount of *hopeful projection.* (pause)

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- We may not think of Jesus as a '*political*' figure. To speak of him in this way raises some real *complications* for us. This is because *we so often associate politics with political parties and policies. But the real meaning of politics has to do with something bigger - it has to do with the polis, with the city and community. Most importantly, it has to do with what holds a community together, rather than with what divides it.* The paradox of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem is that he came to *embody* what *should have been* holding the city together. Instead, he represented a threat to those who held power, and to others who opposed them. So Jesus ended up becoming a source of division and conflict.
- *Look again at that crowd in Tissot's wonderful painting of Jesus' arrival. How many in this crowd are looking directly at him? And of those, how many actually see him, and for who he is rather than for what he represents among their pre-existing concerns? Look at how many in that crowd are carried away by the moment. They are excited by imagined possibilities, rather than by the Kingdom concretely at hand. This situation is not merely of historical interest, nor is it primarily about other people, living at another time. Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem is also about us, and about why we are here today.* For his arrival invites us to consider *our own hopes and expectations* this morning, as we greet our Lord's arrival with palms. And it prompts us to consider how we will walk through this week.
- *Do we want Jesus to 'come into our city' with power and glory? And if so, why do we want him to be here in this way?* These are the central questions raised by our Gospel this morning. Because, for *when Jesus comes with power and glory into our city*, into our neighborhoods and homes, *his arrival has a cost* ~ a cost we may not be prepared to pay. *To recognize him as "king" means that we will have to de-throne all pretenders to his proper role in our lives.* Those pretenders may include *ourselves and our prideful wills*; they may include *leaders to whom we submit*, either unwillingly or unthoughtfully; and they may include *parties or causes to which we attach ourselves.* Yet, *if we do* want Jesus to come into our lives with greater power

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and glory, what is our *motive*? Do we want to honor *him* as *the vindicator of what we ourselves have determined is real and true*? Or, do we want to honor *him* as *the one who comes to re-orient and transform our vision*, so that we become *more nearly like him*?

- Most of all, Palm Sunday presents us with what Tom Wright calls “*the mismatch between our expectations, and God’s answer*” to them. ~> We hope... We want... We ask... Notice how all three of those phrases begin with the word ‘*WE*.’ By deliberate contrast, through the Church and our liturgy, our Lord presents us with a *different way to live, and a different way to pray*. This week, we can center ourselves, and our prayers, on three alternative phrases: *We can focus on God’s hopes... We can focus on what God wants... and, most of all, we can seek to live into what God asks of us.*



James Tissot, The Entry into Jerusalem

at The Liturgy of the Palms

The Gospel ~ Matthew 21:1-11

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Notes:

¹ See 2 Kings 9:13, in context.

² See 2 Maccabees 10:7, in context.

³ See Zechariah 9:9, in context. I am indebted to N.T. Wright's book, *Matthew for Everyone*, Volume 2, for these particular historical references.