

POINTS TO PONDER

^{21.1}When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying 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.'

— *Matthew 21.1-2*

"Bethphage is on the East side of Jerusalem; the opposite side from the West gate where the Roman Soldiers would be marching into Jerusalem in preparation to contain any insurrection that might occur during the Passover – a Jewish holy day dedicated to remembering their liberation from another empire. The great Roman procession from the coast would have instilled fear and trepidation, a force large enough to dominate and control any would-be revolutionaries. Jesus, in contrast, comes from the hinterlands in a procession that would inspire smiles and collegiality, a synergy of enthusiasm from the people that expressed how none was to rule over them or control them, but simply create a kin-dom on earth where everyone worked together for the common good of them all.

Matthew has Jesus and his disciples enter by this route to parody, if not mock, the military procession from the West. Instead of riding in on stallions, like the Romans, Jesus would ride in on a donkey and colt – revealing that it is not military might and the threat of violence that brings real peace, but rather the humility of love and equity between peoples. Even poor people had donkeys, and so Jesus reveals he is in union with the masses; not the hierarchy of those in power. Jesus' use of location and animals reveals his intentional opposition to Roman authority; obvious to the Israelites, but unnoticeable to the Roman officials.

The mention of the Mount of Olives is also significant. It was the predicted place (Zechariah 14.1-4) where God would rescue the Israelites from their foreign assailants, and all that these nations had plundered from Israel would be divided among the Israelites. Thus, Jesus' entry from this locale represents the apocalyptic reality of Rome being overcome by the power of God – though, obviously, not with military might, but spiritual might.

Lastly, Jesus borrows his power and influence from the people themselves, rather than using military coercion against the people. His tactics, in using a donkey and colt from a local person rather than warhorses bred by the empire reveal that his values are the opposite of Rome's; just as he comes from the East and they from the West."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/29/2023*

³'If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "God needs them." And he will send them immediately.'
⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵'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.'"

— *Matthew 21.3-5*

"Jesus was familiar with the townspeople around Jerusalem, and often stayed with them on the outskirts of the city rather than in the city itself. He identified with them, and they with him. He likely had healed people in this area, and his reputation as a defender of the poor and weak would have been known; along with the rumors that he might be the long-awaited Messiah. Thus, it is not an unlikely scenario that some of his followers could have gone ahead and secured the donkey and colt for his use.

Of course, Matthew sees this as an opportunity, like having Jesus come from the Mount of Olives, to reveal that an apocalyptic moment is at hand that will fulfill the prophecies of scripture. Matthew, especially, is intent on supplying the scriptural references for much of what Jesus does, and that he believes will get his Jewish audience to recognize that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. He portrays Jesus as the King of the Jews; even though he acts very differently from most kings – imbuing the people, rather than himself, with power and lifting them from their bondage to oppressors."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/29/2023*

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna (i.e., 'Save us') to the Son of David (i.e., the Messiah)! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'"

— *Matthew 21.6-11*

"It is debatable whether this procession was comical or serious. Donkeys and colts are notorious for doing their own thing, and trying to ride one of them, much more two of them simultaneously, may have been more cause for laughter and frolicsome fun than a serious, yet hopeful and joyous, march into Jerusalem with people genuinely believing that Jesus was the Messiah. [Some commentators point out that he may not have been riding two animals, but only one, in what is a grammatical parallelism called a 'hendiadys', which uses two similar words to depict a singular idea. Hebrew poetry is replete with such usage, as for instance is used in Psalm 119.105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path," where lamp and light are used to depict the same idea, as are donkey and colt.]

People's hopes were high for a Messiah to deliver them from their Roman captors, and yet one can well imagine that they may have been able to laugh at their own situation in parody of what was happening with the Roman troops on the other side of the city. In their laughter at the absurdity of a savior riding in on a donkey and a colt, they may have stuck around to see what would happen – wondering whether their raucous laughter might turn to genuine joy. Or they may have been in earnest in thinking this was finally the time when the Messiah was coming to deliver them, quite uniquely, from their Roman oppressors. We may never know what the mood of the event was, but a case could well be made for either of these two perspectives.

Cloaks spread on the animals and on the road would have been symbols of reverence, an honor often reserved for kings and other dignitaries. Again, whether as a parody or done in earnest, we do not know. Matthew's gospel does not specify that the branches from the trees were from palms; and indeed, only John's gospel, written decades later, does that. Given that palm trees grow to 50 feet tall, it would have been a challenge to cut their branches. In any case, laying cloaks and branches on the road was done usually for only those esteemed with the most honor.

Shouts of 'Hosanna' (i.e., save us) and 'Son of David' (viz., the title of the anticipated Messiah) could have been done seriously or jocularly. And I suspect Jesus would have appreciated the honor, or laughed with the frolickers, in either respective case.

As they come to the city, people of the city are wondering about all of the commotion. They are told Jesus is a prophet, rather than the Messiah; though their shouts indicate the latter. It is unclear why Matthew states it rather ambiguously this way. Given the apparent enthusiasm of the crowd, perhaps understatement was a literary device to add some tension to the perception of who different people believed him to be."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/29/2023*

¹²Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'"

— *Matthew 21.12-13*

"The mood changes dramatically when Jesus enters the temple. Jesus is enraged by what he sees. The Temple, as the symbolic house of God, is to be a place of holiness and prayer. Yet what Jesus observes

are profit-makers, idolaters, cheaters, and crooks. He is more than a little angry here, and it reminds us that being irate over people's disrespect for sacred values is worthy of our own objections.

Matthew's words that he 'drove' them out of the temple and 'overturned' the tables of the profiteers and crooks are clearly strong witnesses to Jesus' righteous anger over what he sees as a defilement of God's values. He wasn't simply condemning the practices he saw with his words, he was physically running people out of the temple and wrecking their places of business.

Such practices performed in the temple were anathema to God's own values, and he could not see letting this practice go on without his condemnation and intervention. It is a different side of Jesus than we are used to seeing, but we need to keep in mind that these vendors, buyers, and business people are violating the very sanctity of the supposedly most Holy place in all of Israel. To allow it to continue would be to be complicit with those who are violating God's values. Jesus can't stand by and let this happen. He must act in opposition.

Jesus is much more forgiving of those who in a single action have erred, but he does not tolerate the continual systemic injustice imposed by those with power. Money-changers (those who changed Roman coinage into Jewish coinage needed for the buying of animals for sacrifices) were known to cheat people, and doing so in the Temple itself was heinous to Jesus.

Matthew notes that Jesus was also infuriated with both the sellers and the buyers of doves and such, indicating that he was not only appalled by the cheating and corruption going on by the sellers, but that he also opposed the very theology of the buyers that somehow they could atone for their sins by sacrificing an innocent animal. Jesus' words hearken back to the prophets, who condemned the thinking that we could buy off God for our sins with animal sacrifices and religious rituals performed rather than doing what God asked: namely, by living by God's own virtues and values in treating people and creation justly.

That Temple Priests allowed and condoned such activities and beliefs delineates how corrupt in their own souls that they had become. His confrontation with the Jewish leaders has previously been only with words, but it all comes to a head here in the Temple when he explicitly and publicly denounces, by word and action, their unrighteous practices. He creates a scene that will now get more than their attention. He has essentially declared spiritual warfare with them.

It is more than his calling them out and denouncing their actions. He is intent on stopping them from continuing their abominations. He wants all the people to know what is going on, and that this kind of behavior is no longer to be tolerated. The time to act is now, he asserts by his own actions. And it is his opposition in word and deed that undeniably led to his death sentence in the days to come. What he did here in the Temple was the final straw for the authorities he so blatantly and publicly condemned.

Jesus is thus not a "feel-good" philosopher who merely speaks platitudes of truth; he is a prophet and an activist who is intent on changing his society. And this is what he is implicitly telling his followers to do when he tells them to go and do likewise; showing the lie of those nominal Christians who think Jesus is all about being nice to everyone and not taking a stand about his core values of helping the poor and oppressed, and of creating a more just, peaceful, and loving society.

This audacious political, theological, and social outrage he manifests in the Temple itself is Jesus being undeniably polemical and insurrectionary. He is not only a dissident, but an agitator to the powers that be. Indeed, he is a revolutionary that wants to take away their power and laws and create a more just society known as the kingdom of God. The officials of his time recognized this was what he was about; as did his disciples. People didn't call him "Messiah," a revolutionary political figure, because Jesus was afraid to be political with his faith. Rather, the title acknowledges that he was intentionally political – because one must be, in Jesus' view, if one is to be ethical, religious, moral, and spiritual.

Jesus, first by his parody parade and now by this action in the Temple, makes it clear that he is opposed not only to Roman authorities, but also Jewish ones who have colluded with the Romans and supplanted Roman values with Jewish ones. As Marcus Borg states, "*(Jesus) indicted the temple authorities as robbers who collaborated with the robbers at the top of the imperial domination system. They had made the temple into a den of robbing and violence. Jesus' action was not a cleansing of the temple, but an indictment of the temple*" (*Jesus: The Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, p. 235). Warren Carter states it more emphatically, "*Jesus attacks the Temple and its leadership. Money was exchanged to enable participation in worship. Overturning the tables disrupts its economy and worship. Jesus quotes Is. 56.7 and Jer. 7.11, a lengthy attack on the corrupt elite who oppress the poor but seek legitimacy in the Temple.... Jesus heals people excluded and manifests God's inclusive presence. He upsets the leaders*" (*The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, pp. 1784).

Is it not strange that so many Christians living today have assumed that their faith is to be divorced from their politics, when Jesus here clearly is revealing that this is an impossibility. Values are not worth much if we compartmentalize them to only specified contexts in our lives, and abandon them in others. Religion, politics, ethics, spirituality, and morality all intersect with one another; and it is the person who lives in self-deception that believes otherwise.

If Jesus becomes irate about those who try to segment their piety and social behaviors to selective aspects of life while acting unjustly in others, then why are there not more Christians who take after his example?"
— *Bret S. Myers, 3/29/2023*

¹⁴The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. ¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry ¹⁶and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?' ¹⁷He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there."
— *Matthew 21.14-17*

"In stark contrast to his treatment of the moneychangers, sellers, buyers, and Priests in the Temple, he took compassion on those with illnesses that these others despised. Jesus was not angry at people in general, but only those who used and abused the system to profit themselves at the expense of others. For those oppressed, victimized, and who were suffering, Jesus remained true to his compassionate and loving self.

The word "cured" expresses that this was not a temporary alleviation of their condition. As physicality is seen as linked to spirituality in the ancient world, this expresses that they were healed completely; both physically and spiritually.

Matthew depicts how corrupt the mindset of the Chief Priests and Scribes were in that they couldn't even be thankful for the cures that Jesus was doing for people, but that they, full of envy, jealousy, and hatred, could only look for ways to show how Jesus was wrong. Of course, they could not convince the people of how Jesus was wrong in his healings of them, but decided to try to do character assassination on him for his not setting straight the little ones who were crying out for him to save them and calling him by the title that stood for the Messiah.

Ironically, Jesus is actually living up to the expectations of what the Messiah would do, but even with the evidence in front of them, the authorities find it blasphemous to call Jesus the Messiah since they themselves don't believe that he is. They try to get Jesus to feel bad about what the children are saying about him (as if he is corrupting their minds), hoping he'll stop the healings, as well as his words and actions earlier. But Jesus does not take into himself their own qualms, anxieties, and deceptions. Instead, he affirms that the children are more in accord with the truth than these supposedly elite leaders of Israel.

The children understand goodness when they see it, rather than, like the authorities, trying to find a way to disparage that goodness because it shows them in full contradiction to that goodness.

Jesus ends up leaving the Temple, and he goes to reside outside of the city – perhaps innuendo that he doesn't want to be associated with it at all. He 'left them' and 'went out of the city' may have some bite to it as a sort of indictment against them. Bethany, of course, is where Mary and Martha, whom we talked about last Sunday, resides. He was going to be among friends after confronting his enemies. He needed a respite from his work to try to change the system."

— *Bret S. Myers, 3/29/2023*