

**JESUS' PEACEABLE "TRIUMPHAL" ENTRY**Pat Cameron; Matthew 20:1-11; April 17, 2011

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Today's text relates what is, undoubtedly, one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament, and one of the most endearing ones. Even in churches that are not used to emotional expression during worship, this story gives permission to children, and all of us, to praise Jesus with abandon. Palm Sunday provides us with a break from the solemnity of the Lenten season—a time to catch our breath before Jesus' trial and crucifixion. On Palm Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' life—in full awareness that by the end of the week, we'll be mourning his death.

A version of this story appears in each of the four gospels. Mark wrote his account first; Matthew and Luke had Mark's story to use as a basis for theirs. And in John, whose gospel includes only about 10% of what's found in the other three, the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is included, as well. This must be an important story—we're invited to pay attention.

This morning, I want to look at Matthew's account of the story. I'm suggesting that it is a performance—a kind of street theatre. It is a satirical drama that illustrates the difference between the politics of Jesus and the dominant institutions of his time. I also want to suggest that the role of the church is to participate in this drama—one that challenges calls us to challenge the principalities and powers of our time.

The setting of the story is Jerusalem. The Passover is about to begin. Throngs of people are walking to Jerusalem. Matthew points out in the previous chapter that "a large crowd" is following Jesus along the road. We get the picture that the crowd following Jesus is growing. Two blind men along the road, seeing Jesus, cry out to him: "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David," Jesus heals them and they follow him.

As Jesus travels eastward toward Jerusalem, he passes thorough Bethphage which is near the Mt. of Olives. The meaning of "Bethphage" is "house of figs." Later on in Chapter 21, Jesus will look for figs to eat in Jerusalem, but finding no figs growing on the fig tree, he will curse, and the fig tree will wither.

From Bethphage, Jesus sends two disciples to the next village to pick up a donkey and the donkey's colt. The older Revised Standard version used to use "ass" for donkey. I think this is one of the most important improvements made by the New Revised Standard Version.. It prevents lots of snickering from children and youth, and much embarrassment on the part of their parents.

The donkeys will be waiting for them. If anyone questions why they are taking the donkey away, Jesus tells them to say that the Lord needs them; and after he's done, they will returned to their owners. In Mark, the disciples get questioned about why they are taking the donkey away; but in Matthew, there is no indication that they had any trouble.

One explanation for the difference in reaction to taking the donkeys, may be that Matthew assumes that Jesus has a ring of followers near Jerusalem. Although his ministry had been elsewhere, the word had spread, and he had contacts who were willing to be a part of his subversive drama.

In the other Gospels' versions of the story, only one donkey is needed. Why, then, in Matthew, does Jesus ask for two animals—an adult donkey and her colt?

Matthew is trying to connect ancient prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures to Jesus' procession into Jerusalem. In Matthew 21:4, he says "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet." Matthew 5, quoting from Isaiah: "Tell the daughter of Zion;" and then with a paraphrase from Zechariah, Chapter 9: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey; and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Matthew omits Zechariah's addition of the words "triumphant and victorious" before the word "humble." —He wants to portray a stark contrast between the way Jesus enters Jerusalem and a triumphal, victorious king.

One argument for the two donkeys goes along these lines: Because Matthew would have been reading the prophet's writings in Greek, he doesn't pick up on a literary device often used in Hebrew poetry: parallelism. Parallelism states a concept or idea more than once, using slightly different language the second time, but with the same meaning as the first time.

The same poem in which Zechariah speaks of "donkey" and "colt," also demonstrates other parallelisms. For example: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem—the daughter of Jerusalem and the daughter of Zion are the same person. Or, "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim; and the war horse from Jerusalem—again, different words for the same concept.

The actual quote from Zechariah about the donkey and colt is "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he; humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The donkey and the foal refer to the same animal. Matthew assumes the prophet means a donkey and a foal, or colt, taking the passage literally instead of poetically. And so, to fulfill the ancient prophecy, Matthew has Jesus send his disciples to pick up two donkeys.

If this is the case, Jesus, then, rides on two donkeys at the same time: one tall and the other short. If this was the case, it would be a comical scene indeed. The crowd would be dying of laughter at this procession.

On the other hand, John Dominic Crossan, a prominent Jesus historian, challenges the idea that Matthew misread Zechariah. Instead, Crossan says Matthew intentionally misused Zechariah's parallelism so that Jesus would send his disciples for two animals. Crossan argues that Jesus didn't ride the colt, but the colt was an important part of his procession. "Jesus does not ride in on a stallion, or a mare, or a male donkey, and not even a female

donkey," Crossan says. "He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting behind her."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' procession into Jerusalem is unlike the processions of Rome into Jerusalem during the Passover. For Passover, the population of Jerusalem would swell from its usual 50,000 people to over 200,000—and these are both conservative estimates. Passover was a celebration of Israel's liberation from Pharaoh, the Romans were nervous about its anti-imperialist theme. (Gregg).

Therefore, Rome reinforced its presence during Passover. Its legions would march into Jerusalem with all their regalia, riding on fine stallions. In contrast, Matthew depicts Jesus entering the city on the humblest of animals. Whether Matthew intended to mean that Jesus rode on two animals, balancing his weight between the two; perhaps falling off a couple of times, or whether, as Crossan suggests, Jesus rides on one donkey, trailed by her little colt, the Gospel-writer depicts Jesus' procession as satire; and the target of his humor was Rome's occupying army.

The crowd lays their cloaks and spread tree branches along the road in front of the procession. (Only John's Gospel says the branches were from palm trees.) This is a typical practice when a military ruler is coming to town. This action of the crowd increases the satirical nature of the procession. Jesus doesn't look or act like a military leader. This is not a "triumphal" entry, as this event has been commonly understood. A triumphant leader would not have come in nonviolently, riding on a humble animal, but would have come in on a war horse, wielding his bow (Gregg).

"Hosanna" the people cry; "Hosanna to the Son of David." Hosanna in the highest heaven!" "Hosanna" comes from the same root word as "Jesus" and was used in Jewish liturgies during Jesus' time. It had lost its original meaning of "save us," and was now used as an expression of praise. So Jesus is praised as a "son of David," connecting Jesus with the Jews' favorite king. Jesus, son of a king, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey—perhaps two donkeys. The crowd becomes an active participant in the drama. For these few moments, while celebrating with Jesus, the empire of Rome has lost its power.

After this action is completed, which we might call "Act 1" of the play, Matthew takes us swiftly to Act 2 in which Jesus goes to the Temple and chases out the peddlers and the "money changers," the predatory lenders of Jesus' day.

So in two dramatic acts, Jesus challenges the legitimacy of both the political and religious establishments in the capital city. The backlash is swift and pervasive. In a few short days, the echoes of the "Hosanna" still ringing in Jesus' ears are drowned out by "Crucify him!"

The church must continue to cry out our praises to Jesus. Our voices must be heard--not only when we gather for worship, but in City Hall, in Topeka, and in our nation's capitol. Our Hosannas must heard in the midst of the clamor of those who perpetuate wars that drain our nation's resources and destroy human lives; in the midst of the din of those who

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl Gregg [www.patheos.com/community/carlgregg--Crossan](http://www.patheos.com/community/carlgregg--Crossan), reference not cited.

would cut services to the poor while championing tax cuts for the rich; in the midst of the spiteful rhetoric from those who lobby for harsh and inhumane treatment of immigrants; in the midst of the drone of those who would relax environmental standards in the name of "progress" and "economic development."

Jesus invites us to take part in the drama of his procession into Jerusalem. Each of us has a role to play. Though the risks are high and the tangible victories are few, the church must continue to cry, "Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."