

DRAMATIC ENTRANCES

A Sermon for the, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

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Our Prayer books give us a choice of Gospel lessons for that Palm Sunday. We can hear either the story of Jesus' Trial and Crucifixion as told in Matthew 27: 1-54, which is there in the Prayer Book and which we heard a few minutes ago; or we could have heard the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the first day of the week of the Passover which is in Matthew 21: 1-17, which is not in the Prayer Book. You may wonder why we have such a choice. After all, It's Palm Sunday; so why didn't we hear the story of Jesus riding in on the donkey? The answer has to do with what the Church considered to be a practical matter many years ago, a matter of timing that might still be a practical consideration for many congregations today.

The timing is a matter of realizing when is it that we celebrate Easter. No, not the exact day, but just during what season of the year? It's Spring, the season of new birth and new growth; it is seed time, the time of planting, of lambing and calving. This is something we tend to forget because of the way our society is organized nowadays, and that is that the world and the things people did many years ago were planned and organized around agriculture. Even in this country, it was that way until sometime in the early 1900s. If it happened that the optimal time to plant a certain crop happened during Holy Week, or the ewes and the cows were giving birth, it was obvious that there would not be many people in church for weekday services. In Christian nations and places, the People worked from Monday through Saturday (*Six days shalt thou labor, ...*); so after the Reformation in Protestant regions, many did not come to church on Good Friday. The Church recognized this and realized that the story of the Resurrection would not carry as much force if the people had not heard the story of the Crucifixion. So, the Church of England put it into the Prayer Book that all four of the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion would be read during Holy Week, beginning with St. Matthew's account on Palm Sunday. You can see this if you will look in you Prayer Books on page 139, where you will see that the Gospel lesson for the Monday in Holy Week is the beginning of St. Mark's account, If you look through the Collects, Epistles and Gospels for the days of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, you will see that each account, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is read, and in that order.

This thing of making sure everyone got to hear at least one of the four versions of the story of Christ's Crucifixion and Burial still carries some weight in our secular society today because there are many people who have to work on Fridays and Saturdays who may not get to hear the Crucifixion story at all unless they hear it on Palm Sunday.

The church thought, and still thinks it is important that everyone should hear one of the accounts of the crucifixion each year in the week before Easter. I think it is important, which is why I read it today even though I want to talk about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. If you come to the Good Friday service, you will hear several more aspects of the story of the Crucifixion from several points of view, which I think are also important.

In past years, I have looked at several themes on Palm Sunday: Jesus' Secret as St. Mark thought of it; His Humility and how it did not stem from His somehow setting aside His power as God; and His Passion, His suffering. This morning I want us to look at His entry into Jerusalem.

It is often called Jesus' *Triumphal* Entry into Jerusalem. To speak of TRIUMPHAL ENTRY, as if Jesus were some sort of Roman emperor riding into His capital city astride a great stallion at the head of great army that has just won a great victory somewhere, would be to mistake the meaning of that event and that day. Part of that meaning comes from one fact, that it is the fulfillment of a prophecy. Jesus had won no great battles, ... yet. Oh, He had won some skirmishes with the Scribes and Pharisees, enough so that they wanted to kill Him, badly enough that they would manage to do that just five days later on the sixth day of the week. Let's look at how St. Matthew describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that day:

Matthew 21:1-11 NAS ¹And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. ³"And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." ⁴Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ⁵"Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your King is coming to you, Gentle, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" ⁶And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, ⁷and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat. ⁸And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. ⁹And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after

were crying out, saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the multitudes were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."

Now, this is not prophecy; this is reporting what happened. This could have been a story in the local newspaper, The Jerusalem Times, on Monday morning; but it is the reporting of the fulfillment of several prophecies and events in the OT that parallel what happened that day. In their book, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Beale and Carson, note that the Jews of Jesus' day interpreted Jacob's death-bed prophecy about the tribe of Judah in Genesis 49: 10-11 to be a prophecy of the Messiah. What Jacob says there is this: Genesis 49:10-11 ¹⁰The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. ¹¹Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. This also has a parallel in 2 Samuel 15:30 and 16:1-3.

The prophecy that is fulfilled in this alternate Gospel lesson for today is Zechariah 9:9-12, which is the OT lesson that goes with this Gospel reading for today. This was written by Zechariah about 530 years before Jesus mounted up on that colt, which was old enough and strong enough to carry Him. Zechariah said it would be like this in Zechariah 9:9 ⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. And rejoice they did, and shout they did, and so He came into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, and the foal of a donkey, fulfilling prophecies with every step.

But was it truly a triumphal entry? I prefer to think of it as a *dramatic* entry, but there is a problem with calling it that. Dramatic entries have a problem in that we sort of expect them to backfire on the person who entered some scene or place in a dramatic way. It is easy to conjure up the image of some egotistical buffoon flinging open a door, and with a dramatic gesture, proclaiming that he will solve some terrible problem, cure cancer and the common cold, and at least order champagne and caviar for everyone present. That type of thing happens most often in melodramas and comedies, but real life has a way of giving such people a well-deserved come-uppance. The scribes and Pharisees who saw this entrance on the donkey were probably snickering behind their hands, just waiting for when they could get their hands on Him.

The thing is, not all dramatic entrances end in tragedy, whether it is tragic tragedy or comedic tragedy. One entrance that is always dramatic is that of the birth of a healthy baby with that first full-throated cry that announces to the world, "I am here, I live, and I am breathing." The entrance of a baby into the world cannot be immediately seen to be the entrance of a fool or a wise man; however, we do know that whatever path the child takes, it will ultimately lead to the grave. Jesus had come into the world that way, and had probably let forth that first cry. He had been to Jerusalem before, many times: was presented in the Temple on the fortieth day after His birth. He stayed behind there when He was 12. He probably went there with His parents three times a year with His parents for the great Feasts of the Jews, and many times later after He began His ministry. This entrance of His to Jerusalem was not the bombastic dramatic entrance of an egotistical fool; it was the humble entrance of a man on a mission, a man who shared his body with God. It was dramatic, but only in a sort of inverted, upside-down way. Here was the King and Creator of the world, riding humbly and unrecognized on the back of a donkey, the beast of burden of those who could not afford a horse.

Jesus was a man on a mission, a mission that had been decreed at creation. How can we say that? Just as God could tell Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:5 ⁵"**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.**", the Holy Spirit inspired King David to write in Psalm 139: 16, ¹⁶**Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.** – that is when there were as yet no days – before time came into being.

Jesus knew where he was going and what would happen to Him. He also knew he had a few things to do before he got to His ultimate destination on this earth, the Cross. He had to clean out the Temple, attend to a few things in Bethany, and then have the Passover Meal with the Twelve, institute the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and reveal many things to the Twelve that they were not yet ready or able to comprehend, with most of those latter revelations being found in the Gospel of St. John. He also knew He would do all that before He was betrayed and captured. He was not in a hurry or on a schedule; He knew it would all get done in God's good time – in His time. And He knew where it would end, or at least where it would seem to end to those who mocked Him when He was on the Cross. That seeming end was the grave with a stone rolled across the door and with that stone sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers.

To the mockers, the ride on the donkey was indeed the dramatic entrance of a fool, a dramatic entrance that ended less than a week later in an entrance to the grave after an ignominious death on the Cross. Henry Hart Milman, who wrote the words to our opening hymn, "Ride on, Ride on in Majesty" saw the irony in the ride on the donkey being a ride in majesty. The irony evaporates when we see the conclusion, the conclusion that mocked the mockers, when Jesus made another Dramatic Entrance that would have been even more dramatic if any person had seen it: His entrance back into this world when He walked out of that tomb. An entrance into one place is an exit from another. When Jesus left this world the first time, His body went into the grave; and His spirit went into Hades. When he re-entered this world, with Body and Spirit reunited, He came to give final instructions to His disciples. Then He left this world in a most dramatic fashion to enter His home in heaven to prepare a place there for us. Dramatic entrances and dramatic exits. We cannot conceive of how dramatic the entrance of a believer into heaven will be. May each of us be found fit to enter that narrow gate. and dwell with Him forever.

AMEN!