

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna^[a] to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna^[a] in the highest heaven!" ¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

; **Psalm 118:1-2** Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. ² Let Israel say: "His love endures forever."

Psalm 19:1-6 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. ³ They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. ⁴ Yet their voice^[a] goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth. ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. ¹¹ By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹² But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. ¹³ Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴ May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

In the ancient world conquest would be followed by the king entering the conquered city to take control. This triumphal entry would include all the pomp that could be mustered — a white horse, columns of troops, trumpets blazing — to the seat of power, where the crown would be seized.

This would be accompanied by the shaming, humiliation and slurring of the conquered king. 'He was never fit for you! You are better with a winner like me!' was the language.

This has carried on to this day. Those who see themselves as strong men carry on in this way, tone-deaf to the increasing perspective that conquest and triumph are suspiciously violent and immoral.

Trump's 2016 electioneering was conquest-oriented mixing vain boasts and mudslinging. Putin's attempted conquest of Ukraine has followed the same playbook — mighty leader conquers pathetic comedian. Neither conquest is or was as glorious as they think. Britain's empire building of the 18th and 19th century also had its vainglory, though we weren't alone on that front.

Palm Sunday was different. What we call the triumphal entry reads very differently to any military conquest. Jesus entered from the East — the prophetically approved correct way — and the crowds lay down palm branches and cloaks and shouted the words of psalm 118.

But Jesus did not come with a large army. He did not despise or slur Herod, Pontius Pilate, or the chief priest of the temple. He did not seize control of Herod's palace. He went to the temple. Later, he left again quietly.

Perhaps you can imagine being in the crowd. Were you there because you saw the excitement of others, thought you'd stay to find out what was happening, and then you were drawn into the excitement and found yourself cheering? Many did.

Perhaps you were a close follower of Jesus, or perhaps just someone who had heard of Jesus from afar and you had thought that this one sounded different. You cheer and wave! He enters Jerusalem, but the *conquest* doesn't happen... that night you feel deflated, perhaps, or perhaps your thoughts are shifting — you want to believe, but you don't know what the plan is, you don't know how it's going to work? Perhaps you are more thoughtful than the crowd, and you can see a depth of kindness and integrity in this king that was always missing from the despots. This is a different revolution, that brings a different rule.

You know what happened next. We meditate on it this week, and I encourage you to read the passages, from the triumphal entry to the resurrection throughout the next seven days. This is a very different victory.

Alexander the Great conquered half the known world in only a few years in the 330s and 320s BC. He would have had many triumphal entries, but he died at the age of 32, and while the Greeks continued a while longer, that empire dwindled. The Romans, equally, knew how to conquer, knew how to spin their victories and how to belittle their conquered enemies. Indeed every other empire that has gone about conquest has sought its moment of glory, and has faded with time.

But Jesus's triumphal entry was different, his throne and crown were different, and though he may have died at a similar age to Alexander, there is a world of difference. Because Jesus rose again, seven days after the triumphal entry, and his kingdom continues to expand — without triumphalism, without slurring enemies, without plunder or shows of force.

Tell me — whose is the greater kingdom now? And what does this say of our king? And how does this shape us, his willing and unforced subjects? What does this do for our sense of security? How does this shape our hope?

Prayer — Lord Jesus, as you conquered Jerusalem quietly, on a donkey, we pray you would give us more of your spirit, that we would not be impressed by worldly glory, but goodness, truth and love, and would be filled more with these qualities ourselves. In Jesus's name, **Amen.**