

It's Palm Sunday again. The church is decorated with palm branches and we have made the traditional palm crosses from the palm leaves. You may well be asking what all the fuss is about. Why is the commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem so important? It wasn't his first visit and neither would it be his last!

Today begins the period some Christians call Holy week, the journey that leads toward the cross on Friday and the Resurrection on Sunday. These are momentous days and I want to encourage you to use them as a time of focusing your attention on the Word of God and the events of this week.

What is it that is so significant about the so-called Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem?

Understanding the Messianic Mission

The triumphal entry is of vital significance in understanding the messianic mission of Jesus. Jesus had refused to allow any public acknowledgement of His being the Messiah. Most of Jesus' ministry was performed away from Jerusalem and the religious leaders associated with the Temple. As far as Jerusalem was concerned, He had managed to maintain a relatively low profile. At this point His behaviour changes significantly. Jesus begins to make use of prophetic drama like the Hebrew prophets of old, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, who acted out their prophecies. The opponents of Jesus understood the strong messianic implications of the manner of His entry into Jerusalem. The declaration over Jerusalem, and the cursing of the fig tree. The significance of riding on the colt, the garments and palm branches in the road, and the shouts of the multitude--all of this pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. When He was urged to quiet the people, Jesus replied, "If these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (**Luke 19:40** NASB).

The triumphal entry has a number outcomes. First it raises the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Second it disappoints some of His followers because upon entering Jerusalem He turns toward the Temple instead of Herod's Palace or the roman Governor's residence. Those who were looking for a purely political messiah were not impressed by the humility of riding in on a donkey. The third outcome was public affirmation of the faithful multitude, a group so maligned by the church ever since.

According to the hymn

*Sometimes they strew his way,
and his sweet praises sing;
resounding all the day hosannas to their King.
Then 'Crucify!', is all their breath,
and for his death they thirst and cry.*

The claim that the crowd that proclaimed Jesus the Messiah is the same crowd that cried for His crucifixion is not indicated by the text and is probably an expression of prejudice at best and/or antisemitism at worst. May I suggest that we omit that verse when we sing the hymn in future?

The Sequence of Events

Matthew's account begins in the previous chapter at **20:17**.

*Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them,
"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death
and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*
(**Matthew 20:17-19 NIV**)

Jesus is aware that this is the final confrontation. He takes on the might of the religious, the secular and spiritual establishments. This gives us an insight into what is in Jesus' mind as he approaches Jerusalem and begins the prophetic drama that will publicly announce His messiahship.

In Matthew 21:1, after leaving Jericho, we find Jesus at the Mount of Olives, a hill less than a kilometer east of Jerusalem, separated from the Temple site by the Kidron Valley. He pauses at one of the villages called Bethphage (Aramaic, "house of unripe figs,") or Beit-Anyah (Bethany "house of the poor,"). Notice that both these villages are associated with poverty – this is part of Jesus identification with humility- an essential characteristic of the Messiah. From one of these villages His disciples get a young donkey and Matthew connects this with two messianic texts from the Hebrew Scriptures

2-7 The key to this passage is the citation from the *Tanakh* in v. 5. It conflates two verses in the Hebrew Scriptures, **Isaiah 62:11** and **Zechariah 9:9**. The former includes the lines,

"Say to the daughter of Zion, 'See your salvation comes!

See, **H**is reward is with **H**im, but **H**is work lies ahead of **H**im." (**Isaiah 62:11** NIV)

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (**Zechariah 9:9** NIV)

David Stern explains that word for "salvation" here is "*yeshua*" identical with the name of the Messiah, Yeshua, except for the optional letter *vav*. Moreover, Isaiah describes this "*yeshua*" as a person, and not just any person, but God — since a person who is salvation must be God.

English translations, including Jewish ones, which capitalize pronouns referring to God recognize this fact by capitalizing "His" and "Him" in this passage, as is done above. One may even say that in this verse Isaiah, writing 700 years before Yeshua was born, refers to him in his divine aspect by name. Zechariah 9:9 has these lines in it:

"Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion!...
See, your king comes to you.
He is triumphant and victorious,
humbly riding on a donkey,
yes, on a colt, the offspring of a beast of burden."

Why does Matthew weave these two verses together in this manner? To understand the significance of this, we must understand the four basic modes of Scripture interpretation used by the rabbis.

These are:

(1) ***P'shat*** ("simple") — the plain, literal sense of the text, more or less what modern scholars mean by "grammatical-historical exegesis," which looks to the grammar of the language and the historical setting as background for deciding what a passage means. Modern scholars often consider grammatical-historical exegesis the only valid way to deal with a text; pastors who use other approaches in their sermons usually feel defensive about it before academics. But the rabbis had three other modes of interpreting Scripture, and their validity should not be excluded in advance but related to the validity of their

implied presuppositions.

(2) **Remez** ("hint") — wherein a word, phrase or other element in the text hints at a truth not conveyed by the *p 'shat*. The implied presupposition is that God can hint at things of which the Bible writers themselves were unaware.

(3) **Drash** or *midrash* ("search") — an allegorical or homiletical application of a text. This is a species of eisegesis — reading one's own thoughts into the text — as opposed to exegesis, which is extracting from the text what it actually says. The implied presupposition is that the words of Scripture can legitimately become grist for the mill of human intellect, which God can guide to truths not directly related to the text at all.

(4) **Sod** ("secret") — a mystical or hidden meaning arrived at by operating on the numerical values of the Hebrew letters, noting unusual spellings, transposing letters, and the like. For example, two words, the numerical equivalents of whose letters add up to the same amount, are good candidates for revealing a secret through what Arthur Koestler in his book on the inventive mind called "bisociation of ideas." The implied presupposition is that God invests meaning in the minutest details of Scripture, even the individual letters. The presuppositions underlying *remez*, *drash* and *sod* obviously express God's omnipotence, but they also express his love for humanity, in the sense that he chooses out of love to use extraordinary means for reaching people's hearts and minds. At the same time, it is easy to see how *remez*, *drash* and *sod* can be abused, since they all allow, indeed require, subjective interpretation; and this explains why scholars, who deal with the objective world, hesitate to use them.

These four methods of working a text are remembered by the Hebrew word "*PaRDeS*," an acronym formed from the initials; it means "orchard" or "garden."

By combining the two verses Matthew gives a hint (*remez*) that God, the Salvation of Israel, the Messianic King and Yeshua of Nazareth are one.

Also he hints at the two comings of the Messiah and the difference between them: at his first coming Yeshua is our final atoning sacrifice, bringing salvation by his death; therefore he rides into Jerusalem humbly on a beast of burden, ready to perform the work which lies

ahead of him. But he will return, triumphant and victorious, as ruling king, rewarding the faithful — although for those who are faithful now, he has already begun to share the reward which he brings with him.

David Stern –From the Jewish New Testament Commentary

Once again David Stern points out that the Talmud contains an interesting homily based on **Zechariah 9:9**, but it obscures the difference between his first and second comings.

"Rabbi Alexandri said, 'Rabbi Y'hoshua set two verses against each other: It is written, "And behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven" (**Daniel 7:13**), while elsewhere it is written, "See, your king comes unto you,... humbly riding on a donkey" (**Zechariah 9:9**). [He resolved the paradox by saying that] if they deserve it [he will come] with the clouds of heaven, but if not, lowly and riding on an ass.'"(**Sanhedrin 98a**)

What we see in the Triumphal Entry and Trial of Jesus is the New Testament synthesis of these seemingly contradictory images. At his first coming the Messiah was "humbly riding on a donkey," but as Jesus tells the High Priest the day will come when He appears "with the clouds of heaven" (**Matthew 24:30**). Thus the dual motif of King-Messiah and Obedient Servant of God, first introduced at Jesus' baptism, at the beginning of his public ministry (and implied throughout that ministry), and plainly enunciated after Peter's confession, again becomes a dominant theme as the curtain rises on the finale of his ministry.

The faithful Multitude of Jesus' disciples.

In an effort to rescue the multitude from the hymn writer I would like to look at what the text says about them. According to Luke's account they were not just any crowd but disciples.

As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen,
38 shouting: "BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

It is possible that these disciples were Galileans who had traveled down to

Jerusalem for Passover. This would differentiate them from the Jerusalem population who were less familiar with Jesus' ministry.

What were they shouting? Hosanna! But what does it mean? I think that most Christians think that it means something like Hurray! It has a much more significant meaning than that. The Greek *osanna* transliterates Hebrew *hoshia' na* (literally, "Save, please!").

The word, and sometimes the whole phrase, is usually rendered as if it were an acclamation of praise: "shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'" Actually "*Hoshia' na*" is a prayer addressed to the Messiah, quoted from **Psalm 118:25-26**; The implication is that the crowds recognized and honored

Matthew 21:18-19 (Mk 11:12-14, 20-24)

To understand this portion of the passage we must keep in mind the prophetic drama that is taking place. When Jesus sees the fig tree He acts prophetically. David Stern says that, "If Yeshua's cursing and drying up the fig tree had been a petulant reaction to disappointment because he couldn't satisfy his hunger, it would be unworthy of anyone, let alone the Messiah. But Yeshua is making a point by means of prophetic drama, acted-out parable. It was not fig season but there was the promise of fruit in that the tree had leaves. Jesus acts out a warning about having the appearance and promise of fruit but not producing fruit. In keeping with Proverbs 27:18 ("He who tends a fig tree will eat his fruit, and he who serves his master will be honored") By his action Jesus here is teaching his followers what it means to serve their master, God: it means simply to **have the kind of trust that comes from God** (v. 22), and that they will wither away if they don't.

Conclusion:

So let us lay aside any doubt or speculation about Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. He willingly accepted praise and worship that was reserved for the messiah and actively played the role. Either you accept or reject His claim – that is an issue of faith. The option to a "messiah-less Jesus" he has not left to us.

End Notes

Stern D. 1996 *The Jewish New Testament Commentary. Maryland: Jewish New Testament Publications Inc.*