

Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12-16)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background

- a. Six days before the Passover time when Jesus will be crucified, he attended a banquet at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, in Bethany (not far from Jerusalem). This is the same Lazarus whom Jesus had raised after four days in the grave.
- b. Mary anointed Jesus' feet with very expensive fragrant oil.
- c. Judas protested that it would have been better to sell the oil and give the money to the poor. However, Judas was motivated by greed. As keeper of the money, he would steal from the funds collected for the poor.
 - i. In the last lesson, we looked at the sin of greed and the love of money: a very dangerous spiritual problem that is addressed throughout the Bible.
- d. Jesus has become popular with the people, through the miraculous signs he is performing. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, including the high priest, want to kill him. The people are wondering if this great prophet and miracle-worker will come to the Passover feast, in Jerusalem.

II. Story of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Read **John 12:12-16**)

- a. Outline of the action of this story
 - i. Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem.
 - ii. The people find out. A great multitude comes out to meet Him.
 - iii. They take branches of palm trees and cry out, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." They shout, "Hosanna!" and refer to Him as "the King of Israel".
 - iv. Jesus finds a young donkey and sits on it as He enters Jerusalem.
- b. Immediate observations
 - i. This event is celebrated in many churches during "Palm Sunday".
 - ii. Growing up in the Roman Catholic church, I recall this story being read and talked about on the Sunday immediately before Easter

Sunday. Also, they handed out bunches of long palm leaves (sometimes called palm *fronds*) to everyone as they left the service.

1. Sometimes these fronds were kept in cars or mounted on the wall behind a crucifix, or even woven into the shape of a cross and kept throughout the year as a reminder of this event.
- c. This story (Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, to shouts of praise from the multitude) is mentioned in all four gospels. In addition to this account in **John 12**, the story is also found in:
- i. **Matthew 21:1-11**
 - ii. **Mark 11:1-11**
 - iii. **Luke 19:28-40**
 - iv. **Question:** Why is this story so important that it is included in all four gospels?
- d. Details we learn from the other accounts.
- i. Read **Matthew 21:1-11**
 1. Jesus told two of his disciples to go to a certain place to find the donkey.
 2. There were *two animals* involved on this trip by Jesus into Jerusalem: a mature donkey as well as a colt (a young donkey). Clothing of the disciples was placed on the animals, and Jesus sat on (and rode) both of them.
 3. In addition to branches being laid down on the road, people also placed *their clothing* on the road before Jesus.
 4. Some of the people shouted their Hosannas to “the Son of David”.
 - ii. From **Mark 11:1-11**
 1. The people say, “Blessed is the kingdom of our father David.” (**Mark 11:10**)
 - iii. From **Luke 19:28-40**
 1. Regarding the colt that Jesus rode on, it says:
 - a. It was a colt “on which no one has ever sat”. (This young donkey had never been saddled and ridden by anyone.)

- b. Also, the colt was found tied up and had to be loosed; and its owners asked *why the disciples were untying their colt!* (**Luke 19:30-32**)
 - 2. The Pharisees hear the followers of Jesus in the crowd saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.”
 - a. Upset about this, they tell Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples!” However, Jesus responds that if the people were to keep silent, “*the stones* would immediately cry out”. (**Luke 19:37-40**)
 - b. **Question:** What did Jesus mean in that statement?
 - i. **Answer:** *No one* can shut this down. If the people don’t shout out praise, nature itself will cry out!
- e. Bible critics *claim* that differences between the gospel accounts are *evidence of errors or contradictions* in Scripture. Let’s consider that criticism.
 - i. **Question:** Do differences like those we see here prove their case?
 - ii. **Answer:** No.
 - 1. All Scripture is inspired by God and is accurate.
 - a. As Paul said, “*All Scripture* is given by inspiration of God.” (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**)
 - b. As Peter said, “...holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” (**2 Peter 1:21**, NKJV)
 - i. The things written in Scripture are not the random recollections of men. The Holy Spirit inspired these men to write what God wanted to be written.
 - c. Jesus said, “...and the Scripture cannot be broken”. (**John 10:35**)
 - 2. What do we do in the face of different accounts, or even “apparent contradictions” in the gospels?
 - a. First, consider whether there is *any way in which all of the accounts could have been true* (number of animals, what the people were saying, how the animals were found, etc.). Ways in which all of the accounts could be *correct*, but incomplete:

- i. There were two animals, but some of the accounts only discuss one.
- ii. Jesus rode on two animals; but *for part of the journey* He may have ridden only one.
- iii. Different people in the crowd may have been saying different things. (Therefore, all statements about what people said could have been true.)
- iv. For example, consider the Trump rallies before the 2016 US Presidential election.
 1. The people at his rallies were shouting, “*Build the wall!*” (referring to a border wall with Mexico; and “*Lock her up!*”, (referring to his opponent who was accused of corruption, Hillary Clinton).
 2. If one newspaper reported that the crowd was shouting, “Build the wall!”, while another newspaper story reported that the crowd was shouting, “Lock her up!”, is there any contradiction? No; the statements, although different, were *both true!*
- b. Furthermore, different details in different accounts are *what we should expect to see, in the case of real historical events* being recorded by different witnesses.
 - i. The variations in the accounts can reflect authenticity as opposed to a conspiracy of multiple parties to create and transmit something that never actually happened.
 - ii. Think about it. *If* the apostles were trying to create and propagate a false story, it is more likely that they would arrange to have *everyone saying exactly the same thing.*
- f. It says that at the time, the disciples did not understand the significance of these events.
 - i. “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written

about Him and that they had done these things to Him.” (**John 12:16**, NKJV)

- ii. **Question:** What does it mean that sometime later on, “they remembered that these things were written about Him”?
 1. **Answer:** Later on, they would understand that these events, and the details in them, were the fulfillment of prophecies that had been written centuries earlier in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament).
 2. Recall that after Jesus was risen from the dead, He returned to tell the apostles how all things must be fulfilled “that were written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” It says that at that time He “opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures”, *referring to the Old Testament prophecies.* (**Luke 24:44-49**)
- iii. **Some Follow-On Questions:**
 1. Which *Old Testament prophecies* were fulfilled by the events in this story?
 2. Why were certain peculiar details mentioned, such as: riding *donkeys*, and taking up *branches* and laying them down on the road? These details seem rather strange. Why *donkeys*, and why *branches*?
 3. Is there any special significance of what the people in the crowd were shouting about Jesus?

III. Further Questions Related to the Triumphal Entry

- a. **Question:** Why are the *donkeys* so important?
 - i. A few facts about donkeys.
 1. The earlier word for this animal is an *ass*. That is the word used in older translations (KJV, ASV, RSV, Douay-Rheims, etc.). The two terms are synonymous; although the earlier term has picked up a rather pejorative association!
 - a. Originally (and when the King James Version was translated) the English word “ass” was simply the name of this animal (based on the Latin word *asinus*; note the scientific name for a donkey is *Equus africanus asinus*).
 - b. However, within about the last 200 years, that word became confused with a similar-sounding word of Old

English origin: “*arse*”, which refers to the backside of a person or animal.

- i. That Old English word may be more familiar to those of us from Irish or English backgrounds.
 - c. Due to this unfortunate confusion between two similar-sounding words of different origin, recent Bible translators switched to the term “donkey”, for reasons that should be apparent.
2. The male donkey or ass is called a “jack” and the female a “jenny”. The baby donkey they produce is called a “foal”. A young donkey is also referred to as a “colt”.
 3. A *mule* is a different animal, the product of mating a male “jack” donkey with a female “mare” horse. The Greek word for “mule” in the Septuagint is literally “half-donkey”. Mules generally cannot reproduce and have some of the characteristics of horses and donkeys. Being larger than donkeys, mules can carry a greater load.
- ii. Mules and donkeys are mentioned throughout the Bible. Some of the more famous references include:
 1. Balaam’s *donkey*, who spoke to the prophet in **Numbers 22**.
 2. King David’s *mule* (half-donkey), upon which Solomon was placed when he was to be appointed king to supplant the usurper Adonijah, in **I Kings 1** (designated **3 Kingdoms 1** in the LXX).
 3. Samson defeated 1,000 of his enemies with the jawbone of a *donkey* in **Judges 15**.
 4. Abraham and Isaac take a *donkey* trip to the place where Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac, in **Genesis 22**.
 - a. The donkey ride in this story may well have foreshadowed Jesus’ own donkey ride to the place where he ultimately would be sacrificed!
 - iii. Significance of the *donkey* referenced in **John 12**.
 1. “Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written: ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.’” (**John 12:14–15**, NKJV)
 2. This is quoting from **Zechariah 9:9**

- a. Zechariah was a prophet from around 500 BC, during the Persian era when the Jews were returning to Judah after the Babylonian Captivity.
- b. This book is saturated with Messianic prophecies, about the Christ who would come.
- c. Read **Zechariah 9:9-10**
 - i. Also consider Brenton’s English translation of the Septuagint, readily available online, which reads:
 1. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion; proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, the King is coming to thee, just, and a Savior; he is meek and riding on an ass, and a young foal.”
(**Zechariah 9:9**, Brenton LXX)
 - ii. The quote in the **Matthew 21** account of this story is direct from the LXX; the one in **John 12** is more of a paraphrase.
 - iii. The people (daughters) are called to rejoice and proclaim aloud that their king is coming.
 - iv. The king is gentle and humble.
 - v. He is mounted on a donkey, *even* (or *and*) a young foal of a donkey.
 - vi. In the next verse (**Zechariah 9:10**), it says that this donkey-mounted king will wage war and destroy the chariots and horses (much greater in war than donkeys!) of his enemies.
3. Great rulers do not ride on donkeys! (Donkeys are small, slow and for the poorer, common people.)
 - a. Eusebius, an early Christian bishop, historian and apologist, from Caesarea in Palestine, wrote c. 320 AD in his *Proof of the Gospel*, book 9, chapters 17-18, about the humility associated with Jesus riding on a donkey.
 - b. **Question:** Can you think of anywhere in the Bible where a great leader rode a donkey?

- c. Instead, generally great rulers ride in chariots or on horses.
 - i. When Joseph is elevated to second place in all of Egypt (below Pharaoh), he is sent through the city in a chariot. (**Genesis 41:42-44**)
 - ii. When another Pharaoh pursues the Israelites as they are departing Egypt some 400 years later, he also is riding in a chariot. (**Exodus 14:1-6**)
 - iii. David had his son ride on a *mule* (or “half-donkey”), which is at least a step up from a donkey! (**1 Kings 1:33**)
- 4. Justin Martyr, an early Christian writer (c. 100-165 AD, a philosopher from Samaria who also went to Rome), discusses this prophecy about a king riding on a donkey with Trypho, a Jew. Justin explains to Trypho how Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey fulfilled the **Zechariah 9:9** prophecy as well as an earlier one, in **Genesis 49:8-12**.
 - a. Read **Genesis 49:8-11**.
 - i. Notice it speaks in this prophecy given to Judah the son of Jacob (referring to the Christ or Messiah who would come from him).
 - 1. He would be the ruler, holding the scepter.
 - 2. His brothers would bow down before Him.
 - 3. There is reference to him having a *donkey’s colt* that is bound up.
 - b. Justin Martyr wrote in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, “And that expression, ‘binding his foal to the vine, and the ass’s foal to the vine tendril,’ [**Genesis 49:11**] was a declaring beforehand both of the works wrought by Him at His first advent, and also of that belief in Him which the nations would repose. For they [the Gentile nations] were like an un-harnessed foal, which was not bearing a yoke on its neck, until this Christ came, and sent his disciples to instruct them; and they bore the yoke of His word, and yielded the neck to endure all

[hardships], for the sake of the good things promised by Himself, and expected by them.

- c. “And truly our Lord Jesus Christ, when He intended to go into Jerusalem, requested His disciples to bring Him a certain ass, along with its foal, which was bound in an entrance of a village called Bethphage; and having seated Himself on it, He entered into Jerusalem. And as this was done by Him in the manner in which it was prophesied in precise terms that it would be done by the Christ, and as the fulfillment was recognized, it became a clear proof that He was the Christ. And though all this happen and is proved from Scripture, you are still hard-hearted. Nay, it was prophesied by Zechariah, one of the twelve [prophets], that such would take place, in the following words: ‘Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion; shout, and declare, daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King shall come to thee, righteous, bringing salvation, meek, and lowly, riding on an ass, and the foal of an ass.’
- d. “Now, that the spirit of prophecy, as well as the patriarch Jacob, mentioned both an ass and its foal, which would be used by Him; and, further, that He, as I previously said, requested His disciples to bring both beasts; [this fact] was a prediction that you of the synagogue, along with the Gentiles, would believe in Him. For as the unharnessed colt was a symbol of the Gentiles, even so the harnessed ass was symbol of your nation. For you possess the law which was imposed [upon you] by the prophets. Moreover, the prophet Zechariah foretold that this same Christ would be smitten, and his disciples scattered: which also took place.” (Source: *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 53; found in ANF vol 1, p. 221-222)
 - i. According to Justin, the account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and its foal fulfilled both the prophecy in **Genesis 49:11** and the one on **Zechariah 9:9**.
 - ii. Justin says the two donkeys foreshadowed the two groups who would be saved by Christ.
 - 1. The mature, harnessed donkey represented the Jews, who had been given

the restraining “harness” of the Law of Moses.

2. The young foal which had never been harnessed nor ridden represented the Gentiles, who never were under the Law of Moses. Justin explains to Trypho, a Jew, that God’s plan was to save *both groups* of people!
 3. Justin then explains to Trypho that in Jesus being crucified and his apostles scattering, yet another prophecy of Zechariah was fulfilled: “Strike the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered.” (**Zechariah 13:7**)
- iv. The significance of what the people are shouting out.
1. The people were crying out, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” (**John 12:13**)
 - a. This is a direct word-for-word quote from the Septuagint version of **Psalm 118:26** (designated **Psalm 117:26** in the LXX)
 - b. Let us read that passage in context, from the LXX version.
 - i. When Jesus and the apostles quote from the Old Testament (and here where it says “blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord”) the quote generally follows the LXX rather than the Masoretic Text. For that reason, the LXX was the preferred version of the Old Testament for the first 300 years of the church.
 - ii. Reading the passage within its context can shed more light on connections between this psalm and the events that were happening as Jesus entered Jerusalem.
 - c. Read **Psalm 118:10-29** (designated **Psalm 117** in the LXX)
 - i. A righteous man is being encircled and opposed by powerful enemies.
 - ii. He is making a grand entrance through the gates.

- iii. It mentions “the stone the builders rejected that became the chief cornerstone”, a prophecy which Jesus applies to himself, as recorded in **Matthew 21:42**, **Mark 12:10** and **Luke 20:17**.
- iv. In **verse 26** of this psalm it says, “Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord”, with wording of the LXX matching what the Jews are saying in John 12:13.
- v. In **verse 27** of this psalm, in the LXX it says, “The Lord is God, and *He revealed himself* to us...”
 - 1. The same term “to reveal” or “to make manifest” is used in **Titus 2:11** and **3:4** to describe the Lord’s making himself known to us.
 - a. “For the grace of God that brings salvation *has appeared* to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age,” (**Titus 2:11–12**, NKJV)
 - 2. The same term is used in the story about the storm that Paul endured in **Acts 27:20**, where it says neither the sun nor stars *had appeared* for many days.
 - 3. So, the Lord God *revealed Himself* (*manifested Himself*) to us through the appearance of this person.
- vi. Here is the picture painted in this psalm: a humble, righteous man, “coming in the name of the Lord” and revealing God, is going through the gates, heading toward the altar (the place of sacrifice); and “the way is decked with branches.” (**verse 27**).
 - 1. **Question:** Why did the people deck the road with *branches*, when they were shouting, “Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord”?

2. **Possible Answer:** If they had this psalm in mind, perhaps they were confirming by *both word and act* that they believed Jesus was the righteous one foretold in this psalm.
2. Other things people are shouting, from all four gospels:
 - a. “The King of Israel!” (**John 12:13**)
 - b. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (**Matthew 21:9**)
 - c. “Blessed is the kingdom of our father David....” (**Mark 11:10**)
 - d. These are clear references to the eternal kingdom promised to David, which one of his descendants would inherit, in:
 - i. **2 Samuel 7** (designated **2 Kingdoms 7** in the LXX) and **1 Chronicles 17**, and
 - ii. Several of the psalms (**Psalm 2**, **Psalm 89**, **Psalm 132**).
 - iii. This was prophesied 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus and confirmed by the angel to Mary in **Luke 1:26-37**.

IV. Conclusion and Summary of the Significance of this Entry

- a. This grand entrance established Jesus as the one who fulfilled the multi-faceted prophecy of **Psalm 118** (designated **Psalm 117** in the LXX).
 - i. He was rejected by the rulers and the nations.
 - ii. He entered in righteousness through the gates to shouts of joy.
 - iii. They said, “Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord!”
 - iv. The Lord, God appeared and made himself manifest (revealed himself) to the people.
 - v. He fulfilled all the prophecies about the great king who would come, the promised descendant of David.
 1. He came meek and humble, riding on a donkey and the foal of a donkey, as prophesied in **Zechariah 9:9** and also foreshadowed in **Genesis 49** prophecy made by Jacob to Judah.

2. The donkey ride to place of execution was also foreshadowed in the sacrifice of Isaac in **Genesis 22**.
 - vi. Even the branches being laid down on the road, on the way to the altar of the great sacrifice (from the LXX version) confirmed this great sign.
 - b. May this story increase our faith and help us appreciate the stories in the New Testament as fulfilling many prophecies in the Old Testament written hundreds of years before the time of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.
 - c. Justin Martyr used this story of Jesus' triumphal entry to prove the faith to Trypho, a Jew. Let us follow Justin's example and also become equipped to prove the faith to unbelievers, using the evidence of the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by Jesus.