



# O WORSHIP THE KING!

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Mark 11:1-11

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Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. For almost two millennia, Christians have celebrated the final week of our Lord's life: from his entrance into Jerusalem as King on Palm Sunday to his death on Passover and resurrection on Easter Sunday. The striking thing about the events of this, the final week of Jesus' life on earth, is that every act of holiness and devotion is birthed in the context of ultimate evil. It is impossible to find a greater expression of love and sorrow than what was manifest during this week when, in the words of the poet, *"sorrow and love flow mingled down."*

We begin with Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. This is a climactic moment in the gospel story—the presentation of the Messiah to the city of the great King. This moment had been anticipated for centuries, ever since the day when David left Jerusalem in shame and ignominy. Following his restoration in the wilderness, his return to Jerusalem (2 Sam 19) was anticlimactic and unsatisfying. He was welcomed home by a cripple, to be plagued with constant internal strife. The former glory of his kingdom would never return. Following the reign of Solomon, and centuries of civil war, Israel lived in exile, aching for a righteous king to restore the nation to her former glory. That ache and anticipation was fueled by the prophets who with one voice insisted the day would come when...

**I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,  
a King who will reign wisely  
and do what is just and right in the land.** (Jer 23:5,  
NIV)

**My servant David will be king over them, and they  
will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws  
and be careful to keep my decrees.** (Ezek 37:24)

**Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD  
their God and David their king. They will come trem-  
bling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.**  
(Hos 3:5)

Motivated by these promises, pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem three times each year for the great feasts would sing verses from the Hallel (praise) psalms (113-118):

**The stone which the builders rejected  
Has become the chief corner stone.  
This is the LORD's doing;  
It is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day with the Lord has made;  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
O LORD, do save (hosanna!), we beseech Thee;  
O LORD, we beseech Thee, do send prosperity!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the  
Lord.** (Ps 118:22-26a, NASB)

How emotional this scene must have been as the Lord approaches the Mount of Olives and the city comes into

view. Here at last is the long-awaited coronation of Israel's king upon the empty throne of David. The primary focus of our text is welcoming the King into the throne of our hearts. Thus it is all about worship, and therefore extremely important, since worship is what makes us most human. These verses will teach us how to give Jesus our King the true acclamation he deserves.

The text has three movements: the preparations for the King; the procession of the King; and, the reception of the King. Surprisingly, each section is dramatically shorter than the one preceding it. Mark devotes far more space to the preparations for the journey than the actual journey (a distance of about two miles), and even less to the moment of Jesus' arrival in the city. This makes for an anti-climactic and poignant ending. It raises the question of why so many refer to this as the the Triumphal Entry.

## I. The Preparation for the King (11:1-7)

**And as they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' you say, 'The Lord has need of it'; and immediately he will send it back here." And they went away and found a colt tied at the door outside in the street; and they untied it. And some of the bystanders were saying to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" And they spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission. And they brought the colt to Jesus and put their garments on it; and He sat upon it.** (NASB)

The Lord and his disciples make their way into the city from Jericho. From there they hike up on the Roman military road that was "about seventeen miles long and climbed three thousand feet. It passed through Bethany and nearby Bethphage ('house of unripe figs'), which lay on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, then crossed over the mount and the Kidron Valley and entered Jerusalem. The mounts stands about three hundred feet higher than the temple hill...affording a spectacular, panoramic view of the city."<sup>1</sup>

Bargil Pixner describes the view:

Much as today, it was a fascinating sight at that time: On the eastern hill of Jerusalem, the city wall with the Golden Gate arose and behind it the wide Temple compound with the Temple at its center and the surrounding walls and builds, beautifully reconstructed and enlarged by Herod. To the back of it, above the Tyropoeon Valley, the ancient palace of the Hasmoneans, which now served as the Praetorium was visible; and far in the

distance, Herod's Upper Palace with its three enormous towers. The Second Wall north of the city partly hid the public garden, where, in a quarry area, a hill had remained, called Golgotha.<sup>2</sup>

Mark records that as they approach Jerusalem they come to a fork in the road, "the left fork leading to Bethany and a side road, the right fork leading past Bethphage on the main, Roman road to Jerusalem."<sup>3</sup> At this juncture Jesus sends two of his disciples on a mission to procure a royal mount. His choice for such an occasion is extraordinary. He wants a young colt on which no man has ever sat,<sup>4</sup>—a most unusual way to make a royal entrance. Having already made the arrangements, Jesus gives the two disciples explicit instructions where to find the colt, what they are to do with it, and finally, what to say if someone objects.

They find everything just as Jesus had said. At a "door outside on the street" they find an unbroken colt secured by a rope. As they untie it, several bystanders question what they are doing. They give the appropriate answer, "The Lord has need of it." Rikki Watts observes, "Impressment, while permitted for others, was very much a royal prerogative."<sup>5</sup> Permission granted, they return with the colt, and place their garments on it to make a saddle for their King.

With everything now ready for Jesus' royal entrance, the little group proceeds over the summit and the city appears in full view.

## II. The Procession of the King (11:8-10)

**And many spread their garments in the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. And those who went before, and those who followed after, were crying out,  
"Hosanna!  
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord;  
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David;  
Hosanna in the highest!"**

Mark records the unrestrained response of the crowd. Immediately upon seeing Jesus astride the colt, they make a "royal" processional highway from their garments and leafy branches and straw gathered from the fields. This is reminiscent of the time when Jehu was anointed king, and "each man took his garment and placed it under him on the bare steps" (2 Kgs 9:13). Jehu's royal highway covered merely the steps up to the building, but this royal highway covers two miles! What a spectacle this must have been. The King, mounted humbly on the foal of a donkey, serenely approaching the city, amidst the feverish work of all to make sure his royal coach never touches the ground. Two miles of colorful garments, straw and leaves. It must have seemed as though all of creation was assembling to greet him.

Accompanying this spontaneously built royal highway is an unrehearsed choir, whose voices resound to the heavens (cf. 1 Kgs 1:38-40). Their singing has a spatial fullness about it, for it surrounds the King both front and rear. And it has a timeless depth. It draws sacred texts out of Israel's ancient past, from the Psalms, singing them with fresh vigor in the fulfillment of the present. The verses come from the great Hallel (Praise) Psalms 113-118, which were sung by the pilgrims as shouts of acclamation and praise in

preparation for their feast days. Here they combine "*Hosanna*" (Ps 118:25a), Aramaic for "save now," also a close derivative of the original Aramaic and Hebrew name for Jesus ("*Yehoshuah*," cf. 2 Sam 14:4; 2 Kgs 6:26), with Psalm 118:26a, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.*" The result is that the ancient blessing of the pilgrims takes on richer and fuller meaning in the present.

And finally, there is a heavenly dimension to their worship, for when they cry, "*Hosanna in the highest*," they expect their singing to resonate all the way to heaven to be answered with an angelic echo of affirmation and acclamation. This is why in the early church much of their singing was done antiphonally, one group answering the other to give the effect of a choir of angels echoing the praise of our worship on earth.

This is the purpose of singing in our worship services. Our music should transport us to a much larger world of time and space, integrating heaven and earth, where past, present and future kiss in a moment in time. And all of this melds together in the midst of very common settings, with the risen Christ divinely present. When that happens as a gift of his grace we are caught up by awe and transported with wonder.

Here then is our King, seated on his royal mount, riding down the highway of holiness, surrounded by spontaneous worship that is large, full-voiced and extravagant. There is even more joy and expressions of acclamation on this occasion than when David first brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam 6). All this prepares us for the reception in the city of the great king. How will Jerusalem, the joy of the whole earth, react?

## III. The Reception for the King (11:11)

**And He entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking all around, He departed for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.**

Jesus entered Jerusalem probably through "what some call now Saint Stephen's gate, near the north entrance to the outer court of the temple."<sup>6</sup> Incredibly, no one was there to greet him. Have you ever landed at a foreign airport and found no one there to meet you? Now imagine a ruler entering the capital city of his own people for his coronation and no one in the administration is there to meet him. Mark does not prepare us for this emotional letdown, unlike Matthew, who says that Jesus wept when he saw the city, knowing she had missed the day of her visitation. But Mark keeps it a secret, suspending our emotions for one of the greatest emotional letdowns in history.

When dignitaries arrived in Jerusalem in ancient times, especially after having won a great victory, there would be no end to the pomp and ceremonial display. There would be "greetings, acclamations, and invocations of God," and the high point would be "a visit to the Temple" with "some sort of cultic activity."<sup>7</sup> But when Jesus enters Jerusalem no one in an official capacity is there to greet him, embrace him, or offer him hospitality. Not one priest, not one scribe or Pharisee, not one representative from the Sanhedrin. Yet it was no different at his birth.

This is a painful echo of David's story. When he brought the ark of the covenant into the city he was met by acclamation of all—until he returned home. It was there, where

he expected to be appreciated by the one closest to him, that he received a massive insult that drowned his joy (2 Sam 6:20). The same fate befalls the greater Son of David.

The silence is like a slap in the face to Jesus. Enveloped in the eerie quiet, he casts his penetrating gaze around the temple. In the deafening silence we can hear Malachi's words:

**“And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?”** (Mal 3:1-2)

Jesus, now alone except for the twelve, leaves the city for the safer soil of Bethany. It is quite late, and Jerusalem proves not only inhospitable but dangerous. So he retreats to Bethany, the place where he took possession the colt, and the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Later, we discover that he took refuge in the home of Simon the leper.

#### **IV. O Worship the King!**

From this processional drama we learn how Jesus is to be worshiped. This is the most important lesson in life, for when we truly worship we are most fully human. How then do we give the acclamation that is due our King? We will end with four observations.

##### **A. The Primacy of Humility**

First, it is highly significant that most of our text deals with the preparation for the coronation of the King. Notice that the disciples, who make these preparations, do so under explicit instructions from the Lord. All has been arranged, agreed to and secured in advance. Everything else in the text is spontaneous and unplanned, except for this one thing. Jesus will not relinquish control of or leave this to chance. What is that one thing? It is the *manner* in which the Lord is presented to his people. Yes, he is the new Son of David, ready to restore the kingdom of David, but he will do so “unlike” David. His Messianic claims to be the Son of David are to be understood in a new way, the way of Zechariah, who said,

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even a colt, the foal of a donkey.** (Zech 9:9)

Humility is to be the great hallmark of the Jesus *way*. As Rawlinson points out, “every confrontation in Jerusalem with them (the Jews) will come down to this: will it be their way or his way?”<sup>8</sup> The only time in the gospels where Jesus gives a description of himself is in Matthew 11:29, where he says he is “gentle and humble of heart.” There would be not an iota of coercion in his rule over the hearts of men. He is to be presented in humility as the one who dies for others. This explains why Jesus used two disciples to secure the colt. In doing so they would learn this lesson well. The job of disciples is to put Jesus forward to the world in this manner, not on a stallion but a colt, humbly dragging his feet on the road to Jerusalem.

So well did the apostle Paul understand this he instructed Timothy as an elder to put on “gentleness” even when

correcting a false teacher, knowing that it was this one quality that could free him from the grip of the devil (2 Tim 2:24-26). Not brilliance, not dogmatism, not military victories, but gentleness. If the church had put Jesus' instructions into practice there would not have been the Crusades or the Inquisition, or indeed the evils that still plague us today.

So whenever we place our Lord before the world we must always present him on the humble mount of the colt of a donkey, not in a limousine of wealth. Our first concern should be to give our Lord his due, presenting him to the world with this face of humility.

##### **B. The Beauty of Anonymity**

The second thing to notice is that unlike the rest of Mark's gospel, everyone except the King is nameless. At other times when disciples are sent on a mission they are named, but here they are nameless, as are the bystanders, the owner of the colt, everyone in the crowd and those in the temple. The only name we hear in this royal procession is Jesus, and the titles of acclamation, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” That is how it should be. As the Lord is crowned King, his servants should fade into the background. We are not worthy to have any attention drawn to ourselves. It is all upon him.

This is one of most beautiful things about true worship. When we give true acclamation to the King we do not need to be center-stage. It is far more fulfilling to have him at the center. This is the picture we get in John's Revelation (4:1-11), as the twenty-four elders fall down in worship, saying, “*Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power.*”

##### **C. The Glory of Spontaneity**

Once Jesus is given his proper place on a throne of humility, and his servants fade into the background, then all of creation breaks out into spontaneous worship and heavenly acclaim. It is then that the highway of holiness that the prophets predicted (Isa 35:8) is made, not by the plans and plans of men, but by the sight of Jesus crowned in humility. That wondrous sight moves the tender hearts of those around to sing like angels and cast forth their garments like the rush of the wind.

**A highway will be there, a roadway,  
And it will be called the Highway of Holiness.  
The unclean will not travel on it,  
But it will be for him who walks that way,  
And fools will not wander on it.** (Isa 35:8)

**Go through, go through the gates,  
Clear the way for the people;  
Build up, build up the highway,  
Remove the stones, lift up a standard over the  
peoples.** (Isa 62:10)

Yet the ability to worship in this way is in the eye of the beholder. Of all those present in the crowd it was only Jesus who saw the true significance of all these events coming together.

##### **D. The Poignant Silence—Judgment/Salvation**

Finally, we discover that in the midst of great acclamation in worship there is also great pain. Those for whom

the entire procession was intended failed to attend. They do not even send their regrets. A pain of silence slaps Jesus in the face. He had anticipated this even in the midst of the loud shouts of praise. As Luke records, he stopped and wept over the city,

**“If you, even you, had only know on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”** (Luke 19:42, NIV)

Later, Matthew tells us that Jesus said,

**“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ”** (Matt 23:37-39, NASB)

Jesus came but once to Jerusalem. The reception he received there determined her destiny: her house would be left desolate. Yet in loyal love, he keeps reaching out, offering repentance. But repentance means they must go back to that place where they rejected him and accept the way that he came, in humility, and start anew from that point. Yes, I find it is this last quality that makes us most human. In my own worship I discover that during the times of my greatest intimacy with the Lord there is a strange mixture, as *“sorrow and love flow mingled down.”* And it comes for the same reason: the life that I received cost a great price.

To keep our hearts in that tender place, I would like to close with a wonderful poem by Christiana Georgina Rossetti, offering it as a prayer for our souls this week.

Am I a stone and not a sheep  
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath thy Cross,  
To number drop by drop thy blood’s slow loss,  
And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved  
Who with exceeding grief lamented thee;  
Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;  
Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the sun and moon  
Which hid their faces in a starless sky,  
A horror of great darkness at broad noon –  
I, only I.

Yet give not o’er,  
But seek thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;  
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more  
And smite the rock.

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1. D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Frank E. Gaebelin ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 437.

2. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus in Jerusalem, His first and last days in Judea* (Rosh Pinah, Israel: Corazin, 1996), 64.

3. Robert Gundry, Mark, *A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 624.

4. The issue of “a colt no man has ever sat” is not due to its being ‘unbroken,’ but an issue of ‘holiness,’ something set apart to God. Jesus is born in a womb no man has ever touched, he rides a mule no man has ever sat, and is laid in a tomb no man has ever been laid (cf. Num 19:2; Deut 21:3; 1 Sam 6:7; 2 Sam 6:3; Zech 9:9; Luke 23:53).

5. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 306. Watts also notes the messianically interpreted oracle of Genesis 49:10-12 regarding the colt.

6. Carson, *Matthew*, 440.

7. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus*, 305.

8. A.E.J. Rawlinson, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Methuen, 1949), 151.