

“Save Me!”

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Palm Sunday

Each year on Palm Sunday, we remember Christ’s triumphant parade into Jerusalem. Jesus has been teaching and working miracles for three years now, so this cannot be the first time he has come into Jerusalem. As an observant Jew, he would have come at least three times a year for the high holidays. But this time, he decides to make a big deal of it. He asks his disciples to find a donkey and its colt. He chooses to ride in on these animals rather than to walk into town unannounced. Some of the people in Jerusalem seem to understand that this entry will not be like the others. When they see this man riding on a donkey, they throw palms at his feet, and sing out “Hosannas!”. It means “save me” or “Save us!” The kind of thing one would cry out to a military leader or king who has come to drive out an enemy like the Romans.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem during the week leading up to the night of Passover. It is a major religious holiday, and it attracts hundreds of thousands of people to the city each year. During Passover, the Romans know that the crowds could get unruly and even spark a revolt under the right leadership. So, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and his troops march into the city on horses and in armour. It’s a sign of force, a reminder that everyone should behave during this festival, and then go home.

But the crowd shouting Hosanna at Jesus has a different idea. They are Jews from all over the Mediterranean. They go to synagogue on Saturdays, where they hear scripture and discuss it. They remember that in the prophecy of Zechariah, it says God will send a king who rides on a donkey. This king will rescue them, and institute a reign of peace:

the battle-bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

today I declare that I will restore to you double.

The Jews in this prophecy have been oppressed - but they looked to God for rescue. They were "prisoners of hope." Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem on a donkey so that the crowds will understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy. The messiah is here, the king who will save them from their enemy. So, they sing out Hosanna, "save us!"

Jesus chose this symbolism on purpose. He wants the people to welcome him as the Messiah. As the one who will bring peace. Leaders do this all the time. They decide what kind of car they will ride in when they enter a city, especially during parades.

Royal carriage

English royalty ride in horse-drawn carriages for special events to underline the continuity of their rule, which began centuries ago.

Carney with cars

Modern politicians prefer black SUVs with bullet proof glass, and they are hard to see.

Pope Mobile

The Pope rides in an electric Popemobile, painted white on the inside and out to signal purity and holiness.

If an American President arrived in a horse drawn carriage, that could signal he wants to be considered a king - perhaps we will see that yet.

So how you enter a city matters. Jesus chooses to be seen as a king from Zechariah's prophecy. The people recognize the symbolism. They cry out Hosannas, "save us!"

But Jesus knows the rest of the prophecy, too. Things do not go well for this Messiah king. After a time of peace, he will be mistreated by his own people. He will be their shepherd, but they will attack him, piercing him.

A few days after Jesus enters Jerusalem on the donkey, he celebrates the passover dinner with his disciples. We remember it as the Last Supper. After their dinner, they retire to the Mount of Olives just outside the city gates.

On the way, Jesus predicts that his disciples will all desert him. Peter and the other disciples deny it, there's no way they would be so disloyal. Jesus tells them they will fulfill Zechariah's prophecy:

31 Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

"I will strike the shepherd,

and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." (Zechariah 13:7)

And, as we know, Jesus is right. He will be abandoned by all of his male disciples. One of them, Judas, will bring the soldiers to arrest him just a few hours later.

This casts the Palm parade in a different light. Jesus has chosen to ride in on a donkey to remind the people of Zechariah's prophecy. They remember the first part - the king who will bring peace. But Jesus knows the rest: he can expect to be deserted by these 12 men he has gotten to know so well. Men who love him, and he loves them. It is all going to fall apart, not just because his enemies will attack him, but because his friends will desert him.

Imagine being Jesus on that donkey, thinking those thoughts. He may not know exactly how this will happen, but he believes in the prophecy enough to invoke it. The promise of peace comes with the promise of betrayal.

So, why does Jesus stay? Would you stay if you knew you might be killed, and that all your friends would desert you? Maybe not - we might make a run for it. One could say, that we might run, but we're talking about Jesus. He's God in human form, he's going to be braver than us. True, but he is human, too.

Agony in the garden

In Matthew's Gospel, on the night of his arrest, Jesus prays in the garden that God might take away this cup from him - that is, the threat of his death. Jesus is a human being, he's scared. He asks God to save him from this terrible end.

Jesus could have escaped. He's living in an era before the internet, before television. There were no wanted criminal posters back then. No big television screens in Dundas Square to show his face as a wanted man. There won't be alerts sent to cell phones warning about a man threatening the state with a rebellion. No, on the night of his arrest, the people who come for him have no idea what he looks like. Judas has told him they should arrest the man he kisses. Jesus isn't recognized even by the authorities who want to arrest him. So, he could have escaped from the city easily.

But he didn't. He stayed. He got on that donkey, knowing that if he was God's Messiah, who would bring peace, he would also suffer. He would be the shepherd who would be struck down and pierced. On the night of his arrest, he prays to God to find another way. But he doesn't run or back out. He ends that prayer with the words, "your will be done." He wants to fulfill God's purpose more than he wants to save his life. He stops asking God to save him. He realizes that there is something even more important than being saved. It is saving others to fulfill God's will.

Jesus knows Zechariah's prophecy well, so he knows what God expects of cities who want God's support and protection. God says that Jerusalem will be helped as long as it keeps its priorities straight. God says:

" Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. " (Zechariah, 7:9-10)

Look out for those who are less fortunate than yourself. Care for the poor. Help others who need help.

Pope Francis understood this.

Clinic Popemobile

One of his dying wishes was that one of his Popemobiles be transformed into a mobile health clinic. He wanted it to serve the children of Gaza who have suffered so much ill health due to the war. It is now called the Vehicle of Hope. This is just one of the many ways he understood God's call to take care of those who suffer.

It's not a complicated request, but it is one easily forgotten. In our times, the poor are often blamed for their plight. The homeless are looked on as second class citizens. Here in Ontario, the social assistance rates for the poor have been the same since 2018 - for a single person, 733 dollars a month. In that time, average 1 bedroom rents have gone up by 500 dollars, but the rates have stayed the same. This is a recipe for creating poverty and homelessness. The new budget released this week by the Ontario government has done nothing to change this. The rates stay the same. There is a tax break for people who buy new homes, expected to benefit 8,000 homebuyers across Ontario. Meanwhile, there are 85,000 people who are homeless in Ontario. The plight of the poor is a low priority in the latest budget, and unless the public pushes back, it is likely to stay that way.

It is so easy to forget the poor. But God never does. And God calls on the well off to care for the people who are suffering.

As Jesus rides that donkey into Jerusalem, he knows the prophecy. As the crowd chants Hosanna - save us!- Jesus realizes saving others is how we save everyone. And yet, for Jesus, that will mean no one will save him. He will have to hope that his death will serve some purpose. That somehow, this sacrifice, will help the people who asked him to save them.

It must have seemed so far-fetched. So unlikely. But Jesus placed his trust in God. A few days after the Palm parade, Jesus was the focus of another parade. One where he carried a cross to his end. Little could he know that one day, that cross would be worn on necklaces, it would be tattooed on arms, it would be on the walls of churches all over the world. That God would find a way to make good come out of evil. That one man's willing sacrifice would give people courage to stand up to evil empires, to stand up to their own raging emotions, and choose peace. A peace that could be planted in one human heart at a time. A peace that can save us, and the world. Hosanna, the people cried. Save us! And he did. Amen.