

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Matthew 21:1-17  
Sermon Title: "Modest King and Mighty Prophet" (Palm Sunday)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA  
March 24, 2013

We are so used to Palm Sunday. We are used to what happens on this day every year with our palm branches waving in the air. Our children come down the center aisle and wave their branches for all of us to see. We smile at them because they are so cute. The display that is put on every Palm Sunday is adorable.

Palm Sunday is like watching a Disney movie or reading a story from a children's fairytale. We read what happens in Matthew 21, and we are jettison to fantasy land. Those people couldn't have been any different than our children, as they wave their palm branches. Clothes are also laid on the ground like a long, continuous carpet for Jesus to travel over. The mood is festive. Everyone is shouting with joyful voices, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the Son of David!" Jesus is the King who rides into his city. He sits on a donkey to show that he comes in peace. The whole scene in the first 11 verses of Matthew 21 is exciting, fun to watch. We love reading about it.

But then the mood shifts when Jesus gets to the temple. He might have ridden his donkey from street to narrow street, winding his way through the city toward the temple of the Lord. Throughout the route, people dropped cloths and blankets and branches and continued to cheer in loud voices. The donkey could have taken Jesus all the way to the entrance of the temple, actually an entrance that led to the courts that surrounded the temple. Nobody was ever allowed in the temple itself except the priests at certain times.

At the courts of the temple the mood is different. People are not cheer Jesus. They are not shouting praises to the King who just arrived. Merchants are shouting in order to attract customers. They are too busy counting money and haggling prices to notice anything else. Worshippers are trying to get the best deals on the animals they need to sacrifice to God. They are too busy to notice God's Son standing nearby.

The scene around the temple is more serious, more adult-like. It is time to pack up Disneyland and leave behind the fairytale of Jesus riding through the street amid waving admirers. Jesus steps off the donkey and is offended by what he sees. Matthew tells us that Jesus goes directly to the temple of God, but the way things are running here Jesus might as well be at the

bazaar. We've seen bazaars in movies, with the English adventurer dressed in white, walking down a narrow road full of people dressed in robes and turbans. Men and women with few teeth in their heads are shouting and holding bead necklaces or fried bugs or caged chickens. Everything is dusty and brown in that bazaar. Definitely not a place where somebody could worship God, not without an empty wallet and a raging headache.

No wonder Jesus is upset, and then tears the place apart. For two whole verses, tables and gold coins and animals are flying in every direction. Jesus is cleaning house, because God's house is not designed for the selling of goods. Go to WalMart or Target for that. God's house is for worship, pain-free, unrestricted, enjoyable worship. Funny to think that there was more happy worship happening on the streets with Jesus traveling on a donkey than in the actually place where communion with God should occur.

And then, the scene shifts again. We return to fantasy land in a way. The story becomes child-like once more, as we read about the blind and lame approaching Jesus. The dust has settled. Jesus has made his point, and merchants are licking their wounds. Now those who really need God, who really need help with the pains and problems they suffer

with every day, those tired and miserable souls approach Jesus, and he heals them. Their sight is restored. Their legs become strong. Happy, pain-free worship is occurring in the temple. Let the scribes and chief priests wonder at what is happening. Let them remain confused. The babes are coming back to the temple. They are praising the Lord as he ought to be praised. The king of peace is here. Things are going to be different.

Dale Bruner is a Presbyterian pastor and former professor of religious studies. He wrote an extensive commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, and the two subtitles he uses for Matthew 21 are: “The Modest King: “The Servant-Lord’s Entry into Jerusalem” and “The Mighty Prophet: The Cleansing of the Temple.” Two things are going on here: Jesus presents himself as a king and as a prophet. People expect him to be both of these individuals. As he rides on a donkey, people are screaming, “Save us, Son of David.”<sup>1</sup> They think he is the rightful heir of King David, the greatest king to ever live. The Romans would be deposed, and Jesus would rule as the sole monarch. However, Matthew tells us that people in the crowd are also saying, “This is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 21:9.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:11.

He is a spokesperson, if not the Spokesperson, of God. Jesus will tell us what God is thinking. He will speak with more authority than the prophet Elijah. He will straighten out the religious order, and he will get people to change spiritually.

People expect things to change with Jesus on the scene, but they will change according to God's vision for his people.

When we read about the triumphant entry of Jesus, we cannot forget about the entry into the temple courts as well. We cannot separate the modest king from the mighty prophet. If we don't have Jesus entering the temple as the mighty prophet, then we are stuck with Jesus riding a donkey and people throwing palm branches in his path, and nothing else. Fantasyland remains a place where we are always happy and nothing gets done. No one is transformed. However, if we just have Jesus storming into the temple courts without the festive triumphant entry, then we have a prophet who seems to be angry, and angry with us, and so we stay clear of him until he blows off steam. Nobody would celebrate or even support his act of turning over merchant tables, if turning over tables didn't begin with throwing down palm branches and clothes.

Dale Bruner says that in Matthew 21, we get to see what the Messiah is all about. There is the mighty, godly side of him, the side you don't want to mess with, because Jesus will have his way. Jesus will get things done for the sake of God and his kingdom, and nobody can stand in his way. There is also the friendly, human side of him, the side that is moved to compassion anytime he sees people. He knows their struggles and pains, he knows their wishes and wants, he knows how to reach people and give them healing. Jesus will get things done for God and his kingdom, and nobody can stand in his way.

As the modest king, he touches the hearts of those in the crowds by riding on a donkey. There is nothing pretentious about a donkey. They are not handsome like a horse, and yet we think they are cute in some way. They are not confident like a horse, but we feel sorry for the sad-looking beast of burden. If we saw Jesus riding on a donkey, we would be just as attracted to the animal as to our modest king. That is Jesus' strategy: to catch us off guard, to make us wonder and yet celebrate his humility, his gentleness.

As the mighty prophet, he shakes up the way things have always been. "How things have always been" will be no more. Jesus comes to institute change, but he is not going to start at the governor's

palace. He isn't going to start at the chief priest's house. He has to start at the temple where worship and fellowship are being denied for far too long.

Notice that Jesus goes after things and not people. Even I had to realize this while reading our passage today. Jesus hits no enemy, but he does hit the wallets of those who are abusing others.<sup>3</sup> Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers. He doesn't pick up the money changers themselves and overturn them. This isn't WWE wrestling (or wrassling). He overturns tables and chairs, the things that are used in that corrupt trade. Jesus goes after the dirty business itself, the things of those who have cheated worshippers.

Jesus is not only love but he is also justice. Justice is not defined as "getting my own way." Jesus is always defining justice as "loving your neighbor as you love yourself." Do for others as you would do for yourself, and as you would want them to do to you. Justice and community go together, where everyone is considered special. We are all an essential part of the group: loved by god, loved by others.

And then, when the tables are overturned, when the dirty business next to the temple is interrupted,

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, cf. 753.

Jesus doesn't go back to being the modest king. He actually becomes both the modest king and the mighty prophet. How do we know this? Look at verse 14. Who approaches Jesus? The blind and the lame. The blind and the lame are not allowed to enter the temple courts for purity reasons. Back in 2 Samuel, there is this mention of a curse of King David, that the blind and lame shall not come into the house" for fear of something awful happening. There is another religious text that said the blind and lame, plus the deaf and dumb, should be forbidden to have contact with the congregation of believers.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus says, "No, no." Things are different now. The Son of David, the true modest King, is now in the temple courts, and he will invite anybody to enter who wishes to worship God. The mighty prophet of God, God's Word, is now present, and he will rewrite the religious texts to say that all who are burdened with any problem may draw near to him. And draw near they do, the so-called outcasts and the so-called acceptable, the little people and the big people. They all give perfect praise.

Christ is our modest king and mighty prophet. This is who our Messiah is. He will not stand by and

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<sup>4</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2*, cf. 755.



watch people be rejected. He will not allow his worship to be tainted. He enters the heart and mind of the sinner with a flourish and a rush. The person feels the warmth of God. We sense the power of God surging, and we know we are in the presence of the Holy. God enters the fellowship of believers with all fanfare and honor, and he makes that fellowship free, joyful, safe. Through Christ the community is cleansed, and molded for ministry, and called out to find others who have no fellowship. We are instructed to find those who have no direction, no support, no one to turn to. They are invited to experience our God and Lord, “who fulfills all of the hopes of humanity and offers an entirely new way of living.”<sup>5</sup>

“Hosanna, Son of David. Save us tired and miserable souls. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” Things are going to change.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, 704.

## **Assurance of Pardon:**

Hear the Good News! The saying is sure and worthy of our full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to sin and be alive in Christ. Friends, in the name of Jesus Christ, you and I are forgiven! Amen.