

Matthew 21:1-11

The Wrong Jesus

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout this world, you can find people with all sorts of strange ideas about Jesus. Some of them are obviously completely wrong and bear no resemblance to the incarnate Word of God who reveals himself to us in the scriptures. But there are some that are a bit more subtle. Taking the truth of who Jesus is and just tweaking it a bit. Just removing a couple of the things we don't like, and adding a few things that we do like. And I used very deliberate language there. Quite often a false Jesus, a wrong view of Jesus, comes from us remaking Jesus in our image, to be what we think is the better option.

It's nothing new. And I like to think of Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as the climax of the biblical accounts of wrong expectations about Jesus. It makes quite a contrast between last Sunday when we heard Martha make one of the few clear confessions of faith in Jesus by any of his disciples or followers, and then today, where we see much ignorance. It's joyful and excited ignorance, but the Jesus the crowds greet as he enters Jerusalem is not the one they think they need. And their actions actually tell us who they think this Jesus is.

Most of the crowd around Jesus probably didn't have a second cloak, but they spread theirs on the road anyway. This mirrors an event much earlier in Israel's history when a new king was anointed in direct defiance to the currently reigning king, and those loyal to the new king spread their cloaks under his feet as a sign of that loyalty.

For Jesus, they also waved the branches they'd cut from the trees to celebrate his arrival. Only John's gospel specifies palm branches, but again this mirrors an event only about 200 years earlier in Israel's history. This time it was Judas Maccabeus who had arrived in Jerusalem after defeating the pagan armies that had oppressed Israel. He had been welcomed into the city by a crowd waving palm branches. And he was the start of a royal dynasty that lasted for over a hundred years.

Then we have what the crowds are saying as they lay down their cloaks and wave their branches:

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Welcoming Jesus as 'Son of David' was about as explicit as you could get. This was, after all, the city which King David had made his capital a thousand years before, and for nearly half that time since, the Jews had been waiting and praying for a king like David to arrive and save them from oppression.

They clearly thought that this was the moment. This Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey was the Messiah. He was going to be their new king, even though King Herod still reigned, albeit as a puppet of the Roman occupiers. Jesus was going to be their new king who had driven out the pagan oppressors from this land given by God to his chosen people. Jesus was going to be their new king who was the son of David, a new and better David who would rule his people wisely and justly. Jesus was going to be the sort of king that the people wanted.

But Jesus knows, and Saint Matthew has told us in his gospel account, that nothing is that simple. We know that Jesus has come to Jerusalem, not to be enthroned like David, or like Judas Maccabaeus, or like Herod, but to be killed. The meaning Jesus attaches to this so-called 'triumphal entry' is quite different from the meaning the crowds are wanting to see in it. And although we do still refer to it as the 'triumphal entry', it was by way of betrayal, crucifixion and death that this King was to triumph over our true enemy, that final enemy of death.

Our new king did come to rule and reign and defeat our enemies, just not according to our priorities, our desires, our wants and supposed needs. And he came riding on a donkey. This probably should have been a clue to the crowds that Jesus wasn't quite the king they were expecting. He didn't come riding in on a chariot or mighty war-horse to defeat the Romans and boot King Herod. No, he came on a lowly beast of burden, only fit for pulling the plough. Yet it is especially appropriate for the arrival of this king because he comes to inaugurate the age of peace, where there is no need for chariots and war-horses, no need for bows and swords.

Jesus did come as a king, just not like all the earthly kings before him. And his entry into Jerusalem is a good reminder for us to be aware of the mismatch between our human expectations and God's answer. The bad news is that the crowds are going to be disappointed. But the good news is that their disappointment is only really at the surface level. Deep down, Jesus' arrival at the great city is indeed the moment when salvation is dawning. The 'hosannas' were justified, just not for the reasons they had supposed.

We see a similar lesson learned, hopefully, by the disciples a bit earlier in Matthew's gospel when he tells them he must suffer and die.

Reading from Matthew 16:21-23 (ESV):

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Jesus tells his disciples who he really is, and what he must do. And Peter tells him off. He basically says, "You're not being the Jesus I want you to be" And Jesus rightly calls him Satan.

Every time we believe in the wrong Jesus, in a false Jesus, the devil has led us away from the truth. Satan has only one trick – to lie. Lie about who Jesus is, lie about what God has said, lie about the forgiveness that we have in Christ Jesus. So often it is subtle. It's still mostly the Jesus revealed to us in scripture, but just with a bit of modification. So, give us Jesus, but lose the bit about suffering for his sake, and add in promises of prosperity, great earthly wealth. Give us Jesus, but lose the bit about hell, and just let us pursue the good things of this life. Give us Jesus, but lose the bit about us being sinners who cannot save ourselves, and just be a good moral example that we can teach our children. Give us Jesus, but lose the bit about Jesus being true God, and just teach us wisdom for living this life. Give us Jesus, but lose the bit where he suffers and dies on a cross, and just let us chase feelings of safety and comfort.

There are so many more. So many other ways that we remake Jesus in our image and end up chasing the wrong Jesus, a false Jesus. And the answer is always the same. Repent, and find forgiveness in the true Jesus. Come to the one who suffered and who promised that his disciples would suffer simply for bearing his name. Come to the one who declares that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one can come to the Father except through him. Come to the one who declares that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, and who exceeds that righteousness on our behalf. Come to the one who is the eternally begotten Son, who humbly took on flesh and dwelt among us. Come to the one who has paid the price for your sin, all of it, even the bits you don't want to admit to anyone, let alone to God. Come to this Jesus, who doesn't promise fame or fortune, but does promise forgiveness, who has defeated your true enemies of sin and death and the power of the devil, and who calls you his own, his dearly loved brother or sister. Come to Jesus with your joyous shouts of hosanna, because he has come to you and given you true life, both now and into eternity.

Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.