

“The Triumphal Entry”
(Matthew 21:1-11)

At this time of the year, our minds and hearts tend to focus on the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ: that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and born of her in a cattle stall and laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn, that the angels came down to announce this great news to the shepherds as they were watching their flocks by night, that these shepherds came and saw the babe and told those who were there all that they had seen and heard, that the wise men came two years later with their gifts of gold, of frankincense and myrrh and worshipped Him. At this time of the year we think about Christ’s birth, we don’t usually think about His death. But we must never forget that this is what He came into the world to do: to die for our sins. Of course, He came to do a lot more than this: to live for us, to obey the Law of God for us, to be an example to us of how we are to live to give glory to the Father. He came to reveal to us many more things that the Father wanted us to know about His plan for the world, and what He wanted us to do after He completed His work of redemption. He came to be lifted up as Ruler over all Creation, and to plead His merits and His righteousness on our behalf, when we sin. He came to do a lot of things. But that which is held forth in Scripture as the most important is that He came to die for us. This is what we are reminded of this morning.

This chapter of Matthew begins the final week of Christ’s earthly ministry, a week which He spent in and around Jerusalem. Remember, Jesus already told us that “it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem” (Luke 13:33). Jerusalem is where the Sanhedrin sat in judgment, that judicial body that had the power to acquit or condemn. This was the place where the rulers of Israel would officially reject Jesus and condemn Him to death. This is the place where, by so doing, they themselves would be forever locked out of the kingdom and bring God’s retribution and wrath upon the Jewish people. But this is also where our Lord Jesus would open a fountain of life, of eternal life, for everyone who would believe on Him. What I want for us to focus on in our text this morning is what Jesus came to Jerusalem to do: He came to set up the New Covenant, to set it into motion, to open a door of salvation, that whosoever believes in Him might be saved.

We come now to Christ’s arrival at Jerusalem, the time of His unveiling. There were so many times before He had warned evil spirits and men not to make Him known, but now He was about to reveal Himself openly as the Messiah. And so Jesus and His disciples came near to Jerusalem, and stopped at the Mount of Olives, which was near Bethphage. The Mount of Olives was called this because of the olive trees which grew on its slopes. It was just to the east of Jerusalem, about a Sabbath Day’s journey away (which was about 1000 yards or a little more than half a mile), and separated from it by a small valley, called the valley of Kidron. There was also a small garden at the foot of this mount called Gethsemene, the place where Jesus would spend a good deal of His time as He prepared Himself for His crucifixion and death. Bethphage was also on the Mount of Olives, and was probably the village where Jesus would now send His disciples to find the donkey and its colt. Jesus told them that as they entered the village, they would immediately find them. They were to untie the animals and bring them to Him. And, if anyone said something to them, they were to say, “The Lord has need of them,” and those who

owned it would immediately let them go. How did Jesus know this? The animals were providentially put there by His Father just for this purpose, and the Spirit had revealed that to Jesus. What the multitudes would say about Jesus at the end of this passage is true: He is a prophet. He was anointed with the Spirit above measure. Even in His human nature, He would know all that He needed to complete the mission that His Father had sent Him on.

Now why did Jesus need this donkey and her colt? Was He tired out from His journey? Was it that He didn't want to walk any further? No. First, He needed it to fulfill prophecy. Jesus was always careful to do those things that were predicted of Him. Isaiah wrote concerning the Messiah, "Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth, say to the daughter of Zion, 'Lo, your salvation comes; behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him'" (62:11). And Zechariah prophesied, "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 on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9). Matthew gives us a sort of paraphrase of these two prophecies, which wasn't uncommon in those days. This is what the Lord had said Messiah would do, and so this is what Jesus had to do to fulfill all righteousness. Some have accused Jesus of simply playing the role of the Messiah. They say that anyone could have picked up the Old Testament, read the prophecies, and simply acted out what the Messiah was supposed to do. Certainly, that would have been possible in some cases, but in others, it wouldn't. Many of the things that were said in the Old Testament really weren't that clear until Jesus came to fulfill them. And many many others were fulfilled in His life in a way in which He would have had no control over them. Could Jesus, if He had only been a man, have had any control over who His parents would be: that both would be the children of David? Could He have determined where He would have been born: in Bethlehem? Could He have made sure that the prophecy about the male children two years and younger in Bethlehem being killed would have been fulfilled? Could He have had any control over His parents running away to Egypt and then returning to Israel to settle down in Nazareth? And could He have had any control over how He would be tortured or with what kind of death He would die? Jesus didn't just know His Old Testament Scriptures well, and die as a martyr for some hopeless cause. He was and is the Messiah. All the Scriptures were fulfilled by His coming. This is why He needed these animals.

But was there any other reason why He needed to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey? Yes there is. Perhaps I mentioned it before in another context, but a donkey was one of the animals used in the cutting of a covenant. A covenant was said to be "cut" because an animal was cut in half and the pieces laid on either side, and then the two who were making the covenant would walk between the pieces and make an oath, which included a curse for failure, upon themselves, saying, "May I become like this animal if I should break this covenant." This is what the Lord did when He made His covenant with Abraham. Abraham cut the animals in half, and then waited for the Lord. But while he was waiting, he fell into a deep sleep, and after the Lord made His gracious promises to Abraham, He walked through the pieces by Himself, showing that He would ensure that the conditions of the covenant would be fulfilled (Gen. 15). Here, our Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey as a sign that He was about to cut a new covenant with His people, and He did so by Himself as a sign that He was going to guarantee that the conditions of the covenant would be met: He had and would continue to obey the Law perfectly, and He would pay what God's justice demanded for our having broken the covenant.

But there was one last reason why He would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, and that was to show His humility. Here was the Lord and King of all creation riding into the holy city to present Himself to His people as their King on one of the lowliest animals He had made. He didn't come on a great war horse, or a noble white steed, but on a humble donkey. Look again at the prophecy, "Say to the daughter of Zion -- the daughter of Zion is the people of Jerusalem, for Jerusalem was built on Mount Zion; the daughter of Zion refers to the people who live there (cf. Ps. 45:12 'the daughter of Tyre) -- behold your King is coming to you -- the promised King, the Son of David, the heir to David's throne, and with Him the promised kingdom, the kingdom of God -- gentle -- He would be humble; He did not come in fierce anger or wrath to bring judgment, but in gentleness and meekness, for Jesus did not come to judge, but to save (John 12:47) -- and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden" (v. 5). Paul tells us that even though Jesus existed in the form of God, He emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant. He became a man, and being a man, He humbled Himself even further by becoming obedient to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). His riding into Jerusalem on this donkey was a part of that humble obedience. The next time we think that anything the Lord calls us to do is too far beneath our dignity, we should remember what our Lord Jesus Christ did for us.

Well, the disciples went and did just as Jesus told them, and they brought the donkey and the colt to Him. Then they laid their outer garments on these animals, and Jesus sat down on them. Most of the multitude spread their outer garments in the road, and others, who perhaps didn't have an outer garment, cut off the branches of trees and spread them in the road. This strawing of the road was what would be done for royalty, for kings. It was their version of the red carpet treatment. And there were some who ran ahead, and others who followed behind, crying, "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (v. 9). This was high praise. Hosanna is a word of praise. It means "save now." "Save us now, O Son of David, king of Israel. You are blessed, because the Lord of Israel has sent You, as He promised He would to free us from our enemies (Ps. 118:26). Hosanna in the highest." This last phrase "Hosanna in the highest," could either be praise to the God of Israel who dwells in the highest heavens, or it could have been further praise of Jesus. Now the Jews probably saw Jesus more as a political Messiah than a Savior from their sins. They expected that He would save them from the tyranny of Rome and bring in an earthly kingdom. But they were wrong. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. It is not a political kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom. However, His kingdom would rule over all the kingdoms of the earth, and would eventually influence all of them.

Now when this great parade which started at the Mount of Olives entered into Jerusalem, the whole city was all in a stir, and the people began to ask, "Who is this?" (v. 10). The multitude didn't tell them that He was the Messiah. It could have been that they were afraid. They didn't want to confess Him to be the Messiah because of the earlier threats that they would be put out of the synagogue if they did (John 9:22; 12:42). But this doesn't seem very likely at this point. Everyone in the crowd was freely proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. It was probably because those who asked already knew what they thought of Him from all the praise they had given. What they wanted to know was, Who is this man you are calling the Messiah? And so they told them, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee" (v. 11), which, I'm sure, they already knew.

Now in closing, I would like for us to reflect again on the reason why Jesus came into the

world: He came to begin the New Covenant, to shed His blood, to die, to confirm that covenant. As I said, He came to do several other things as well, such as to teach us God's will and the importance of our obedience to it, to obey the Law for us, to intercede for us, and to protect, defend and rule over us. But He also came to save us, by laying down His life for us. How many people do you know who love you enough to lay down their lives for you? How many do you know would die for you without a moment's hesitation? You probably don't know that many. You who are parents would probably lay down your lives for your children. If your parents are still alive, they might do so for you. Husbands, you might lay down your life for your wives, and wives you might do so for your husbands. The same might be true of those who are engaged. But you'll notice that it's only in the closest of relationships that anyone would be willing to make this great of a sacrifice, because this requires a great amount of love. But this is exactly the kind of love that Jesus has for you this morning, if you are His child, a love which was strong enough to go through the agonizing death of the cross -- not just the pain of the beatings and the humiliations and the nails and the crucifixion, but the pain of God's wrath being poured out upon Him on the cross. I think we often forget what our salvation cost Christ. It cost Him a lot. And I think we often overlook the kind of love He must have had to do this for us. Maybe if we thought about these things more, we wouldn't be so quick to sin against Him, and others, and we wouldn't be so apt to leave undone all that He commands us to do. Jesus laid down His life to save us from our sins. But He did so that we might lay down our lives for Him, for our brethren, and for our neighbors. At this time of the year, as we reflect upon the birth of our Lord, let's remember why He came. Let's remember what His sacrifice calls us to do, and by His grace, let's purpose to do it, to give ourselves more whole-heartedly to His service. Amen.