

## **Matthew 21: 1-17**

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were explaining something for the umpteenth time and you still knew you were not getting through to the other person? It happens all the time, not just parent to child but child to parent, both teacher to pupil and pupil to teacher, between adults ... until, very often, one party says: "Which word do you not understand?"

There are of course different reasons why we do not appear able to understand. Some people have a real phobia of technology. They may be highly intelligent people, but, faced with a mobile phone, they freeze. They are convinced they cannot cope, and nothing you say to them will change their belief.

Sometimes people do not want to hear the message. When you say to your child, "It's bed time", of course they understand what you are saying, but they don't want to hear the message, so it gets blocked out.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time, he knew what awful things lay in store for him. But in addition, he was suffering the frustration of trying to explain to his followers a message that they did not want to understand because it was so awful, it was the opposite of what they wanted to hear.

As Jesus walked those final miles he tried yet again to tell his disciples what was going to happen (Matthew 20:18,19):

*"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man (EXPLAIN) will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life."*

How much did his friends take this in? Verses 20-28 make it clear that even James and John, two of Jesus' closest friends, did not understand either what was going to happen or what the nature of Jesus' kingdom was. Their mother, who was one of the group of women

who followed Jesus, approached Jesus and asked that her two sons should have the most important places in Jesus' kingdom. We have the impression that the two adult sons may have felt embarrassed at their mother's request, but they were keen to hear the answer. I'm sure Jesus could have done without this at such a critical moment, but he calls the disciples together and points out 2 things that they did not want to hear:

- In effect Jesus says that the world is set up one way, with people exercising authority over other people, but that his community was founded on a very different principle ie that leadership is service to other people. He reminds them that his whole life, which they had shared with him for the last 3 years, was a life of service;
- Secondly, he tells them, using a metaphor they were familiar with, that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many. The

payment of money secures the release of a captive or the freedom of a slave.

*“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Matthew 20:28)

As Jesus and his followers reach the ridge of the Mount of Olives, the city of Jerusalem comes into sight. But they are not on their own, because thousands of pilgrims from Galilee and further away are arriving by the same route.

Among this crowd, and with their noisy support, Jesus stages a sequence of symbolic actions; a clear challenge to all to make up their minds as to who he is; a claim that he is their king; and it is all the more impressive because it is presented in deeds, not in words.

Jesus had walked all the way from Galilee and did not need a donkey in order to travel the last 2 miles. But he did need a donkey in order to portray who he was. We simply don't know whether this donkey belonged to someone in Jesus' group, or whether Jesus had made arrangements in advance with the owner or

whether he as a Rabbi was exercising a right to requisition the donkey. Nor does it really matter. What does matter are the 2 visible statements which Jesus is making about himself.

By entering the city in this manner Jesus is taking the role of the person mentioned in Isaiah 62:1, a passage which promises the coming of a saviour, and then Zechariah 9:9, which describes the arrival of the King:

*“Say to the daughter of Zion, See, your King comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* (verses 4, 5)

Jesus is demonstrating to all the people (and they knew their OT very well) that he is fulfilling the promise of the coming king.

But although the promise is there in the OT for all to see, the people were not expecting a Messiah who looked gentle or humble and rode on a donkey. They were wanting a conquering general, a military figure on a white charger whose very appearance spoke of earthly power and might.

Jesus’ triumphal entry speaks of suffering and humiliation.

And yet however much Jesus wanted the crowds to understand his mission, it was perhaps inevitable that in their enthusiasm they would get carried away with their own ideas of a Messiah and king. Nationalist hopes of freedom ran high at festival times.

The welcome which Jesus got was spectacular and noisy; spectacular because of the size of the crowd and the way in which they used their coats and the branches to make a “red carpet” for Jesus; noisy because palm branches make a rattling noise when you shake them and because people were calling out the words of greeting and praise from Psalm 118.

This psalm was written for use as an important figure comes through the city gates and approaches the temple on a big festive occasion. Individuals or groups of people call out to each other:

*“O Lord, save us (hosanna)!”*

*“O Lord, grant us success”*

*“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”*

*“From the house of the Lord we bless you”*

As a result of the commotion, the whole city was stirred (10). But there was complete confusion as to what it all meant. The people of the city ask: *“Who is this?”* And the crowd reply *“This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee”* which sounds like an anti climax after the hints that Jesus might be the Messiah. Although again, given how good their knowledge of the OT was, some may have been thinking of the prophet promised away back in the time of Moses:

*“The Lord your God will raise up a prophet from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”* (Deuteronomy 18:15)

But most orthodox Jews were looking for a Messiah who would do something dramatic and unmistakable. He would claim the throne of David in Jerusalem, he would show miraculous strength, and he would destroy the

Romans as the angel of death had destroyed the Assyrians centuries earlier.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry people had been asking:

*“Is this the one who was to come, the Messiah?”* (Matthew 11:3)

*“Could this be the son of David?”* (12:23)

But others, especially in his home town, were both amazed and sceptical:

*“Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offence at him.”* (13:55-57)

And even here, at the very end of his life, people are still asking:

*“Who is this?”* (21:10)

*“By what authority are you doing these things?”* (21:23)

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem he was forcing the authorities to take action. He was also making people think about who he was.

Different groups responded in differing ways. There were the **disciples**, the group of 12 men and a small number of women who followed him wherever he went. Despite moments of illumination, they still misunderstood what Jesus was all about; the incident with James and John and their mother shows this only too well. They had witnessed many miracles, listened to Jesus' amazing teaching but still had to be reminded that he had come to be a servant and to give his life as a ransom for many. It was only after Jesus' death and resurrection that they finally thought: "Now I get it. That's what Jesus was telling us all along."

Isn't it immensely reassuring that God does not give up on us because we are so slow to understand? We need constant reminders that the kingdom of heaven is not about our importance but about service.

The second group which we read about is the **crowd** who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. They had reached their conclusion about Jesus; he was "the prophet from Nazareth". This was

a safe conclusion, because it was true as far as it went, but it didn't make any demands on them.

- It did not involve the costly business of following Jesus.
- It did not involve standing up against the chief priests or against popular opinion.
- It meant that you could stand back and wait to see what happened.

But the problem was that this was not a real option. The time was coming, indeed the time had already arrived, when you had to be for Jesus or against him – there was no middle ground. The cross lay ahead, and the resurrection, and people were going to have to choose whether Jesus was who the Gospel writers claim – the messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world – or whether he was a complete fraud.

Yet still today many people will say that Jesus was a good man or a great teacher, and leave it at that. But as CS Lewis amongst others has pointed out, Jesus does not leave us that option.

When we look at the claims which he made about himself both in his teaching and by his miracles, we either have to accept that he was deluded (like a man who thinks he is Napoleon)

A deliberate conman (he set out from the beginning to deceive people)

Or he is who the early disciples came to realise: “The messiah, the Son of the living God” (Peter)

“My Lord and my God” (Thomas)

Amazingly, one group who seemed to have more idea than most were the **children** (verse 15). They were getting a row for being too enthusiastic and calling Jesus “The Son of God”. But then, was it not Jesus himself who said that unless we repent and become like little children, there is no way we will ever enter the kingdom of heaven.

The people who most strongly rejected Jesus were the **religious leaders** - the Pharisees, teachers of the law and chief priests. In their eyes, Jesus was unacceptable. For them,

authority was a matter of status. For Jesus, authority was a matter of service. If you wanted to become a Rabbi or teacher, you had to go to one of the Pharisees training schools, you studied and passed your exams and became a teacher of the law. You had your status. But Jesus had not come to earth to fit in with human ideas of power and status. He had come to bring in a kingdom which was and is completely revolutionary; whose ideas were so challenging that the only way the authorities could deal with it was to put Jesus to death. The lowly figure who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, turning his back on military might and political power, was too dangerous for them to allow him to live.

Today, as then, the prevailing culture is opposed to Jesus, although with one important difference. In the first century, none of Jesus’ opponents denied that the miracles had happened. The attacks on first century Christianity claimed that Jesus had done these signs because he had learned how to do magic

tricks in Egypt or that he did miracles through the power of the devil. There was no point in denying what Jesus had done when there were so many people around who had seen his miracles. The evidence was there for the Pharisees to consider. But to accept that Jesus was the Son of God would mean giving up power and status, and that they were not prepared to do.

Perhaps we think that we are well removed from the Pharisees and their rejection of Jesus. But do we not often want to domesticate Jesus? Are we not guilty of wanting him to dance to our tune and produce miracles to satisfy our desires? We reduce him to a divine slot-machine whom we think we can manipulate by doing religious actions or saying the right words. And that is just like the people of Jesus' day who demanded signs. Whenever we put ourselves at the centre of the universe and imagine that God exists to satisfy our felt what sons of Adam and daughters of Eve we really are.

This Easter, as we hear again the story of this Sunday – the triumphal entry  
Thursday – the Last Supper and the agony of Christ in Gethsemane  
Friday – the crucifixion  
Easter Sunday – the resurrection  
May we all, whether we are not yet Christians or whether we have been believers for a long time, look at this figure who approaches Jerusalem on a donkey, coming not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for us. Let us make way for him and let his kingdom into our lives.