

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

How God's Wisdom Comes to Town

Matthew 21:1-11

Say the word, parable and most people think of quaint stories that Jesus told. Ask people to name a parable, they'll mention the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, maybe one or two others. But parables also may be dramas acted out in front of our eyes, street theater, you might say, aimed at getting results. We do the same today. You want to call attention to your cause? Organize a demonstration! Happens all the time. People dramatize their stories. That gets publicity. Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem. Nowadays that might make CNN Headline News. Maybe it was only a demonstration. But, maybe it was a drama acted out, a parable demonstrating how God's wisdom comes to town.

Parables are much more than quaint little stories, much more than attention getting demonstrations. Parables are secret weapons. Like a Trojan horse, they appear innocent, non-threatening. People let down their guard. When they do, a parable attacks. It confronts people with extreme contrasts. It subverts world views, it seeks to convert a way of life. Something happens to people who pay attention, really pay attention, to parables. Their lives are transformed. They change their minds. Parables open their eyes. They see themselves and others in new ways. The parable alters the way they look at life. There's a lot to parables that don't meet the eye. They are like little land-mines of new life just waiting to explode inside your mind, and change it.

No wonder Jerusalem was all shook up when Jesus rode into town. The whole city was in turmoil, shaken to its foundations, the scripture says. Suddenly they faced a dilemma. Who is this, they wondered? It's kind of like sitting at an intersection when a huge limo drives by. Curiosity gets the better of you. People peer at the tinted glass, trying to catch a glimpse of the person inside. Who's riding into town in such style? And what does it mean? And if those people watching Jesus remembered what the prophet Zechariah said, if they remembered Zechariah's prophecy: Rejoice Jerusalem, "your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey," if they remembered that, then they were faced with a dangerous decision. Is this the Messiah, the new king of Israel?

But if he is the new king, he'd better watch out. The Romans wouldn't take too kindly to Caesar's rivals. Matter of fact, all those standing by had better watch out as well. Rome rarely discriminated between actual followers and casual onlookers. So here comes trouble riding into town on a donkey. Here's Jesus acting out a prophecy, and staking claim to his kingdom. No wonder the people got excited. Why they even gave him the shirts off their backs. What might they give him if he asked for the strength of their arms and the backbone of their loyalty? What then? No surprise then that the Romans took notice. Here was revolution in the making. Jesus rides into town on a donkey, signaling the coming of God's reign and the whole place goes crazy with excitement and fear. No wonder Jerusalem was in turmoil.

And yet, his riding into town on a donkey really doesn't look like revolution, does it? What's the big deal anyway? Unless he really is who they say he is, King of Israel. One commentator sees Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as an in-your-face challenge to Rome. He says Jesus, "was

lampooning imperial authority by bouncing into town, not on a prancing horse-the symbol of the warrior-but on a donkey, the peasant's plodding beast of burden."¹ Not on a warhorse, but on a donkey, a peasant's ride. Nowadays we might say, "Not in a Hummer, a converted war machine, but in a Chevy, a used one at that."

Seems the Romans were in the habit of staging a big demonstration after conquering a city. "First, the new ruler... would march in on horseback accompanied by his troops, wagons loaded with booty and prisoners in chains. The parade would be welcomed by cheering crowds who were often ... herded to the street by Roman soldiers. There would be speeches by the local elites, perhaps written by the Romans, welcoming the conquerors. Finally the new ruler and his entourage would proceed to the local temple to offer a cultic sacrifice to whatever gods were honored there, and to the Roman deities who had made the conquest possible."²

Can't miss the similarities between Jesus' entry and that one. It certainly seems as if Jesus were challenging Rome. And yet, there was no army, no prisoners, no booty, no welcoming speeches by the local elites. There was nothing at all that could possibly threaten a mighty empire, nothing that is but a man who loved people, who preached words of hope, who healed with a touch, who inspired people with a simple gesture, who surely could have stayed out of the limelight, safely teaching in Galilee for a long, long time. Yet here he was riding a donkey into town, saying that it was time for God's reign to be acknowledged. He knew exactly what he was doing that day when he rode into town and marched to the Temple to turn the tables on the powers that be. To the eyes of faith he was announcing that God's kingdom has come. And if God's kingdom has come, well that means it's time to do things in a new way.

So what do you think? Is he who he is claiming to be or isn't he? There's no middle ground. Has God's reign begun? Is Jesus Lord? Or shall we just go on about our business? It's not an easy decision, especially when being wrong is so costly. Remember when Martin Luther King, Jr. marched to Selma? Was he following Jesus? Was he an agent of God or just a madman taking on an oppressive system? How about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers convincing Yum Brands and McDonalds to pay an extra penny a pound for tomatoes? Dare we see that agreement as a sign of God's wisdom at work? The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange claims the agreement is illegal. If it is in fact illegal, what shall we do? Shall we side with Burger King and undercut the agreement? Or shall we stand opposed and insist on a better way? Faced with Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, we have a decision to make. Shall we agree that God's reign has begun? Or shall we cling to the ways of the world?

What if he isn't who we think he is, and we make the mistake of believing he is? How embarrassing. We sure wouldn't want to do that. Moses warned against false prophets, against having other gods before God. Better to be cautious, than wrong. Or is it? Shall we cling to our worldview that resists civil disobedience? Or shall we throw ourselves eagerly into the crowd, and risk it all? There's isn't any half-way commitment, you know. We'd feel pretty foolish on Christ's bandwagon, if he turned out to be an imposter. Not to mention what the rest of the world might think of us. What if he isn't the Messiah, and we claim he is?

But what if he is the Messiah and we fail to join him? So sure that everything is as it should be, how often are we blind to new possibilities or to the need to change? So confident that we know the way the world works, we squeeze wonder to the edge of life. Tell me, when you look at the

¹ Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company Mariner Books, 2004), 213.

² *ibid.*

pictures of distant galaxies do you see just stars? Or do you feel a sense of the wonder and mystery of it all? When you contemplate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem do you wonder at the wisdom of God's way? I think it's time we stopped being so cautious about our faith. It's time we said yes to the God's claim on us. Time we throw caution to the winds, wave our palm branches in celebration, and get involved at the risk of everything. This is the Christ, the Son of God, riding into town on a donkey. Blessed are those who welcome the one who comes in the name of the Lord.