

Matthew 21:1-11 – Palm Sunday 5th April 2020 – Paul Simester

Aim: Challenging with the servant spirit of Jesus, the servant spirit of the Christian, and the servant spirit of the crowd.

Jesus usually avoided the spotlight. Though he used and won conflict situations, he didn't actively seek them. Most crowd scenes in the Gospels were spontaneous. Yet we've heard in our Gospel reading details of a consciously orchestrated spectacle.

A Roman emperor would have ridden in on a chariot pulled by white stallions.

A politician, even in those days, would have been surrounded by security guards.

A general would have galloped past with a wave of his hand.

A religious leader would have moved sedately, but ensured that the 'unclean' were kept at a respectable distance.

Yet Jesus borrowed a donkey, and rode amongst the crowd.

And the crowd managed to almost completely miss the point.

- How ironic, for example, that they shouted out '**Hosanna**'. Hosanna means '**save us**', and it's found in our Old Testament reading, Psalm 118 v25, '**O Lord, save us.**'
- They shouted, '**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.**' That comes word-for-word from the very next verse, Psalm 118 v26.
- Yet later in Matthew 21, when Jesus is teaching in the temple courts, he has to remind his listeners of the previous verses, Psalm 118 v22-23, '**The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.**'

And sometimes we, too, can hear this story and manage almost completely to miss the point. Jesus was throwing down the gauntlet; he was challenging people to make up their minds about him. But in this passage we also learn much about what it means to follow him, what it means to be a Christian, and I'd like to focus on one aspect this morning – let's call it the servant spirit.

First of all, and most obviously, we see the **servant spirit of Jesus**.

Jesus didn't come into the world to seize political authority but to save the world. He didn't come to claim a golden crown or jewel-encrusted sceptre, but instead accepted a crown of thorns and a wooden cross.

His entry into Jerusalem was an act of genuine humility – on the back of a borrowed donkey. There's a need for Christians to be real, to be themselves, and not put on acts of piety.

His entry into Jerusalem was an act of humble service, not to dominate others but to liberate them. There's a need for Christians to handle power, authority and popularity in ways that serve others rather than merely control them.

And his entry into Jerusalem was an act of practical obedience – remember his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane? '**Not my will, but yours be done.**'rd(Luke 22:42) There's a need for Christians to listen to God and to do as he commands, to be prepared to put aside earthly desires for a comfortable life, a secure life. To be prepared to step out in the footsteps of Christ.

Secondly, thinking back to the beginning of the Gospel passage, we have a reminder of the **servant spirit of the Christian**. Jesus sent two disciples ahead of him to find a donkey saying, '**If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them.**'

We Christians need to acknowledge afresh that all we have belongs to the Lord, that everything is a gift from him. We need to recognise that each of us has a 'donkey' – something the Lord wants us to give to his service.

We need to be willing to give what we have to the Lord even if it seems very ordinary to us, perhaps especially because it seems ordinary. And we need to believe that what we have can be used powerfully; that its effectiveness can be multiplied, when placed in the Lord's hands.

Consider the donkey. A donkey was an everyday sight, used for all manner of things, yet when used by Jesus that gift enabled prophecy to be fulfilled, it carried Jesus towards the Cross, and it's been remembered for 2,000 years.

Now of course, if we truly believe that God is almighty, we must believe that Jesus could have done it by himself, but he preferred to involve others. And today he's perfectly capable of doing everything himself, but he chooses to involve us – he chooses to use what we have to offer, no matter how small, or ordinary, or insignificant it may seem to us in the great scheme of things. We need to be willing to give what we have to the Lord.

So we've looked at the servant spirit of Jesus, and the servant spirit of the Christian. Finally, let's consider **the servant spirit of the crowd**.

Who was there, in the crowd, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem? Jesus' disciples were there certainly, but many in the crowd were simply caught up in the excitement of catching a glimpse of someone famous. In the last verse of our gospel reading **the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?' And the crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet.'** [□](*Matthew 21:10-11*)

Some of the crowd may have heard Jesus teach in the past, perhaps seen him perform miracles. Many would simply have been there out of curiosity, they'd heard much about this man. What did he look like? What would he say? Would he perform miracles? Would he lead a revolt against the Roman occupiers?

Doubtless there were many in the crowd who were fascinated by the man Jesus. But they weren't committed to him, there's more to discipleship than enthusiasm and experiences.

And there would have been others – opponents who resisted all he said, the indifferent who would remain unaffected, the enthusiastic who were merely following the action. Only a few were there who were committed to Jesus, who would allow him to be Master of their lives and allow themselves to be his servant.

Let each of us here this morning understand. Jesus was throwing down the gauntlet; he was challenging people to make up their minds about him. If we're to be true disciples, true Christians, we must learn from the servant spirit of Jesus, we must learn from this passage about the servant spirit of the Christian. But fundamentally, we must learn from the servant spirit of the crowd.

Close your eyes for a moment, imagine you're in the midst of the crowd. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people were there on that day we call Palm Sunday. They're shouting and cheering all around you, they're jumping up and down, craning their necks, perhaps climbing trees to catch a glimpse of this man riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. In your mind, look around at the people – can you tell who is resisting his teaching? Can you tell who is following along yet ultimately remains unaffected? Can you tell the enthusiastic from the committed, the follower of the action from the true servant of Christ?

Can you tell? It's almost impossible; so many faces, so much noise and distraction.

But keep concentrating for a moment longer. Jesus turns a corner and is lost to sight, and the crowd slowly disperses. You notice that people begin to split into groups, discussing what has happened, talking about what they know of this prophet from Nazareth.

- One group is plainly rejecting all they've heard.
- Another group is still excitedly talking about what they've just seen, about the number of people who turned out, about how they managed to get the best views and how much they enjoyed the occasion.
- Another group is pleased they saw Jesus, but don't really know what all the fuss is about.
- Still another group is discussing all that Jesus has said and done, agreeing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and considering how they can best give their lives in service to him.

And ask yourself – which group am I attracted to? Which group should I join? Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet, and is challenging each one of us to make up our minds about him. Are you prepared to allow him to become Master of your life? Can you live a life filled with the servant spirit?

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, you came in triumph yet humility,
to a welcome yet also rejection,
to a crown yet also a cross.
Thank you for such humble service.

We welcome the King riding on a donkey.
Lord Jesus, come into our hearts today,
drive out our pride and self-conceit,
cleansing us from all evil.

Lead us deeper into your kingdom,
clearer into your purpose,
and nearer to your love,
that by your strength you will help us to go the way of the cross.

Amen