

Matthew 21

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¹And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, ²Saying unto them, “Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. ³And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, ‘The Lord hath need of them;’ and straightway he will send them.”

⁴All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵“Tell ye the daughter of Sion,
Behold, thy King cometh unto thee,
meek, and sitting upon an ass,
and a colt the foal of an ass.”

⁶And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, ⁷And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. ⁸And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way.

⁹And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying,

“Hosanna to the Son of David:
Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest.”

¹⁰And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, “Who is this?”

¹¹And the multitude said, “This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.”

Jesus was under necessity of constantly correcting the world’s twisted view of what greatness and power looked like—a view to which his own disciples seem to have held and to which they expected Jesus to conform. Over and over again, Jesus found it necessary to repeat by word and action that rather than being accepted and raised to a position of power, he would be rejected and killed. Scandalously, he maintained that his death would, in fact, be a sign and evidence, not of his failure and weakness, but of his greatness and power.

Such assertions always left his disciples feeling embarrassed and confused. Who can blame them? Whoever heard of the sort of greatness and power that Jesus advocated and practiced in his own life? Jesus would keep at it right through his final breaths. Leading up to his scandalous death on the cross, he used his “Triumphal Entry” on Palm Sunday as another sermon on the nature of true greatness and power.

It seems almost certain that Jesus intended his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem to stand in clear contrast to the common Roman triumphs that celebrated the accomplishments and grandeur of Emperors and Generals. Now, the Romans knew how to throw a triumph. Emperors and generals entered the city in huge processions and with great pomp and fanfare, evidence of their popularity. Mounted on muscular and prancing stallions and driving defeated and subject peoples before them, they sought to project power, control, and dominance through intimidation and aggression. Using public funds, no expense was spared to conduct lavish processions, games, and feasting. These could go on for many days. These, too, spoke of the honoree’s powerful and commanding societal dominance.

Yes, Rome’s leaders appreciated the power of propaganda that a triumphal entry provided. They knew how to preach their own version of sermons about the nature of power and greatness. So, the sermon Jesus preached on the day of his Triumphal Entry through his very intentional selection of a donkey as his means of conveyance into Jerusalem could not be more at odds with Roman traditions of triumphs and the propaganda they disseminated about greatness and power.

Jesus intended to be a king and leader like no other. He had no interest in seeming dominant and intimidating. He intended, rather to be openly approachable and accessible. Jesus would be a “meek”

king. This word, related to “friend,” means to be “gentle,” “soothing,” “allaying,” “calming.” Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had used this same word of himself when trying to explain the nature and character of his greatness and power.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;
For *I am meek* and lowly in heart:
And ye shall find rest unto your souls.”¹

Palm Sunday affords us the opportunity to reexamine our view of true greatness and power. We can use Jesus’ example on this day to strive a little harder to harmonize our thoughts of striving for “greatness,” and our use of “power” with Jesus’ values. Jesus’ example on Palm Sunday should lead us to observe those deemed to be leaders—sacred or secular—and consider how they use power and express power. Those who follow Jesus’ example of meekness are worthy of our trust and support. Those who do not are not worthy of our trust and support. Finally, Jesus’ example on Palm Sunday reminds us that when we pray we should do so as if approaching a Being who is by his very nature, meek, friendly, soothing, and approachable.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: April 9, 2025)

¹ Matthew 11.²⁸⁻²⁹

¹²And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, ¹³and said unto them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called the house of prayer;’ but ye have made it a den of thieves.”

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them. ¹⁵And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David;” they were sore displeased, ¹⁶And said unto him, “Hearest thou what these say?”

And Jesus saith unto them, “Yea; have ye never read, ‘Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?’”

I remember learning about the infamous “Hole in the Wall” located in northern Wyoming. For half a century, American outlaws used it to escape arrest and punishment for their criminal behavior—Kid Curry, Black Jack Ketchum, the Logan brothers, Butch Cassidy, and Sundance Kid among them. So, I was intrigued by Jesus’ charge that Jewish leaders had turned the temple of his day into a “den of thieves,” a place the “religious” went to hide their criminal behavior and hide from the consequences. The intrigue grew with the realization that Jeremiah had delivered the exact same charge some 600 years earlier.

“Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” (Jer. 7.¹¹)

Immediately before this condemning question, Jeremiah issued this stark warning:

“Trust ye not in lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, *are* these.’

“For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; *if* ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

“Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered to do all these abominations?”²

Jeremiah witnessed unjust and cruel treatment of people outside the temple and saw it as inconsistent and contradictory to the supposed holiness of the Lord’s house. Indeed, injustice and cruelty toward others defiled the temple.

Like Jeremiah, all the Hebrew prophets were often ambivalent and even skeptical about the temple. It seemed to them that ordinances, scrupulously conducted inside the temple, often overshadowed and even replaced moral and godly behavior outside the temple.

Criticism such as Jesus’ and Jeremiah’s is not restricted to Jewish temples. It would seem that such sham religion is not uncommon. Religious peoples of all sorts and sects run afoul of the law and use their temples, synagogues, sanctuaries, churches, chapels, and meeting houses as places of ill repute. In fact, it might be as common as not. Claiming insight into our day and our religious culture, Mormon, who lived on the other side of the world from and a millennium after Jeremiah, and nearly half a millennium after Jesus, complained,

² Jeremiah 7.⁵⁻¹⁰

“Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. O ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers, who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God?³

We should note the common element to the criticism: money: the “root of all evil.”

Today, we often adorn our places of worship with ill-gotten and vainly spent cash as a vain attempt to hide a multitude of sins outside our places of worship. The temple is, then, in Jesus’ view, indicative of an immoral society that attempts to hide its immorality through vain religious show. It is also indicative of a society whose immorality so often takes the form of insatiable economic lusts that lead to injustice. As usual, the insatiable economic lusts cause a devaluing of others, putting economic gain over individual needs and personal dignity.

This is seen in today’s reading by the apparent contempt that religious leaders show toward the “blind and the lame” and their enthusiasm for Jesus and his good news: “Tell these people to shut up!” But, it is in these very people, whom they wish to silence—the “blind,” the “lame,” and all other vulnerable populations—that a “pure religion” would be most interested and concerned to serve, rather than the financial interests of a religious/ political elite.

Jesus’ cleansing of the temple reminds us of the need to forsake our self-made Holes in the Wall, confess our sins committed outside the temple rather than boast of our “righteousness” inside the temple, and alter our attitudes and behaviors toward the vulnerable. The Lent and Easter Season is a good time to allow Jesus entrance into our temple and cleanse us of all sham religion that puts legalistic and economic concerns and actions above the needs of others, especially the vulnerable.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: April 9, 2025)

³ Mormon 8.³⁵⁻³⁸