

Mark 11:1–11

When Jesus and his disciples were approaching
Jerusalem,
at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives,
he sent two of his disciples
and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you,
and immediately as you enter it,
you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden;
untie it and bring it.
If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’
just say this,
‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here
immediately.’”
They went away and found a colt tied near a door,
outside in the street.
As they were untying it, some of the bystanders
said to them,
“What are you doing, untying the colt?”
They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed
them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw
their cloaks on it;
and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks
on the road,
and others spread leafy branches that they had cut
in the fields.
Then those who went ahead and those who followed
were shouting,
“Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the
name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest!”
Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple;
and when he had looked around at everything, as it
was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

John 12:12-16

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

15 “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!”

16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Sermon: What is love?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In the gospel of Mark, today's reading marks a critical turnabout. Up until this point Jesus seems to have been trying to keep his identity quiet. Beginning with the leper healed in chapter one, to whom Jesus said 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest.' and continuing with Jesus reaction to Peter's confession 'You are the Messiah' in which he replied 'tell no-one about this.' and all the episodes in between, Jesus continually commanded the spirits and cautioned the people to keep silent about him.

It's not clear why, but it is the case that the Jesus of Mark's gospel tried to keep his identity under wraps, even as he continued to perform public miracles that attested to the power of God and the presence of God's Kingdom.

But now, as Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem, he made plans for his coming out party. Just as he was intentional about hiding his identity, he was intentional about making this day a day of revelation.

He made arrangements to have a colt ready for him to ride into the capital. Jesus had been walking around the countryside for three years. Never before had he needed a ride – the only other time we hear of Jesus on a donkey was when he was still inside Mary's womb. So, why now?

Jesus didn't need the donkey because he had tired feet – he needed the donkey to make a statement. The donkey was going to announce the arrival of the Messiah, the anointed one. This donkey wasn't like Balaam's donkey who spoke – it was a different kind of announcement than that. This donkey spoke through its presence – a powerful donkey indeed.

The donkey signified to those who were in the know, that Jesus was the King of Israel.

As Jesus approached on his humble steed the crowd remembered Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

So shout aloud they did, crying
Hosanna! Save us!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel

And so the people rejoiced, they celebrated. They waved palms, threw their cloaks on the ground before Jesus – which strikes me as odd – they aren't saving Jesus' feet from the stones, but the donkey. But, no matter. They received Jesus with loud celebration.

It occurs to me that this must have been a bittersweet day for Jesus. While everything on the outside looked joyous, the parade, the victory - on the inside Jesus must have felt wretched. Jesus knew what would happen over the coming week. He knew that these same people who cheered him would soon be calling for his blood. He had explained as much to his disciples, though they didn't seem to comprehend quite what he was saying.

As he entered the city, among the cheering throng, Jesus knew that very soon his disciples would fall away, that he would be humiliated, tortured, and killed. Maybe he did need that donkey after all, for he would have been walking with a very heavy heart.

This discrepancy between the exuberant joy expressed by the crowd and the knowledge that Jesus carried within him is what I would like to focus on this morning, because it reveals something very important about love, and the contrast between human love and divine love.

Clearly, the people loved Jesus. Jesus was like a rock star on that morning – everyone wanted to greet him, be seen by him, touch him. Why?

That bit from Zechariah, the one that reads:

'Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

continues, and it says –

He (the Messiah) will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war-horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations.

The King will stand between Israel and the chariots and warhorses of their oppressors. To a nation that had been struggling under an occupying force, this promise of peace and protection would have meant a great deal.

¹² Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

Prisoners of hope – a wonderful phrase directed to prisoners of Rome – now they are captive to the burning spark of hope within their breasts - today I declare that I will restore to you double. Not only are the Israelites going to be set free from their oppression, they are come to come out ahead – restored doubly.

For I have bent Judah as my bow;
I have made Ephraim its arrow.
I will arouse your sons, O Zion,
against your sons, O Greece,
and wield you like a warrior's sword.

Armed insurrection is what this passage promised. The peace would come, but it would come as the tribes of Israel stood together under their new king.

So, when we return to the fanatical welcome that the people gave to Jesus, we can see that they weren't really welcoming Jesus – they were welcoming victory. This became abundantly clear when the crowds realized that Jesus was not going to perform to their expectations.

Once they realized that Jesus was not going to lead them in a revolt to restore the independence of Israel, they turned on him. Some of those who were shouting their blessings upon Jesus were, days later, shouting curses and calling for his death.

Often, human love is like this. It is fickle, and that's because it is often self-centered. We don't really love other people, we love what they do for us.

Guys, we love the beautiful woman, because when she is on our arm we feel like a winner. Other men envy us; women are intrigued and wonder what we have that would attract such a mate.

That's not love. It's a selfish emotion that only feels good as long as we are getting something. It's self-directed – how I feel, what you do for **me**.

I love the way you make **me** feel.

I love the way you look at **me**.

I love the security and social standing that your family or career gives to **me**.

I love your trust fund and the lifestyle that it affords **me**.

I love that you listen to **me** and do whatever I tell you.

All of this is self-love. We don't so much love the person as we love what they bring to us. If we're really honest, in many cases we ought to look deep into our partner's eyes and boldly declare 'Baby, I love **me** so much.'

This is the love that the people had for Jesus. He loved what they thought he would do for them, but they didn't love Jesus himself. As soon as he didn't perform to their expectations, they rejected him.

Jesus' love is exactly the opposite. He loved those people who cheered him. But he didn't love them because of what they did for him, or how they made him feel. We know that because he didn't turn away when they did. He didn't stop loving them when they began to mistreat him.

He didn't stop loving the disciples when they slipped away, one by one. He didn't stop loving the people when he was being flogged and beaten, blood running down his back. He didn't stop loving the people as he staggered out of the city gates carrying his own execution device on his back, because it was more convenient for them to do things outside the city.

He didn't stop loving when the nails pieced his wrists. He cried aloud 'Father forgive them. They don't understand.'

Jesus' love, God's love, is not fickle, nor is it dependent upon what we do. Indeed, it endures despite what we do. Jesus' love is steadfast, enduring through hardship and even death because divine love actually loves the person, not an ideal or a circumstance.

Jesus demonstrated his true love for the people by giving them what they needed, not what they wanted. He genuinely wanted what was best for them.

The people wanted a revolution. They wanted to kick the Romans out and reclaim their country. This is what they saw as freedom.

But Jesus saw a greater freedom – a deeper sovereignty. Of what use would it be to regain all of Israel, but to remain sinners, estranged from God? It's only window dressing. What will it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose your soul?

Jesus recognized the true enemy – not the Romans – but Satan. Sin and guilt are what imprison us much more deeply than taxes and tribute. Jesus came to bring peace to the nations, not destroy nations. That peace comes from setting individuals free, and inviting them to live in the peaceable kingdom. Under such a process the nations fade into irrelevance.

The important thing is that Jesus loves us with a divine love that does not depend upon our fulfilling certain expectations. He loved us before we were born. He loves us because the Father created us. He loves us because in his heart we are worth loving. That's a different kind of love than what we are used to.

That's the takeaway from this episode of the triumphal entry. Human love is often self-centred and fleeting – based on the questions 'what have you done for me lately?' Divine love is other-centred – 'what can I do for you?' Divine love endures through hardship, through suffering, even through death and betrayal.

This divine love exists within each of us. We can learn to practice it by letting go of our selves and our concern for what other people can do for us, and instead learning to see other people as God does – as precious, beautiful creations, each of whom is worth dying for. And each of whom is worth living for.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!

Amen.