

# **Palm Sunday**

## **The Way of the King**

**Ruth Rhodes**

Mark 11:1-11

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Good morning. Can you hear me okay? Great. Well, happy Palm Sunday to you. Thank you so much for having me to speak this morning. It is always a joy and a privilege to be able to speak with you all, so thank you for that. If you don't know me, my name is Ruth. I teach in our local comprehensive school, and I've been part of this church for about 15 years. And it is a real joy this morning to see lots of people here who've been a part of that journey through those 15 years. So it's great to see you.

I'm going to talk this morning about the Palm Sunday reading, the classic reading of Jesus riding on the donkey into Jerusalem. And kind of three chunks. We're going to look at what Jesus is doing. And then what the crowd is doing. And then I'm going to ask you, so what are you going to do? So that's what we're going to do this morning.

Let's start with Jesus, because it's always a really good place to start, I think. If you're new this morning to this passage, then I think that's amazing because you are going to respond to it in exactly the right way, the way you're kind of meant to respond to it, which is to go, well, that is just weird. That is so weird. What is Jesus doing riding on a donkey colt into Jerusalem like what is that?

Because the problem is for those of you who've like been in churches for a long, long time or like me had the joy of like being brought up in a Christian family, you've probably heard this story hundreds of times and we just are like oh yeah sure it's the Palm Sunday reading and he's riding on a donkey sure and we almost get immune to the sheer wonderful weirdness of it. So this morning, I kind of want to take you back to, no, but it is weird, right? It's a really odd thing to do.

A donkey colt, let's just be clear, because when I was looking this up, I was suddenly like, hang on a minute, is this like animal cruelty? How young is this thing? It's okay. A donkey colt is a that's up to four years old, but here's the critical thing that makes it a colt. It's not yet been ridden. It's untamed, which in my mind opens loads of questions about what that first ride on the donkey colt was like, because I'm thinking, did Jesus hop on the back of this thing, and because it was like, oh, hang on, it's the son of God, it was gorgeously tame and calm, or was it like you'd expect the very first jumping on the back of a horse to be. Do you know? You can talk to Miranda and Alan about the difficulty of untamed horses. Like it's quite a challenge.

And it is an exceptionally odd choice. This is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This is a major moment. And you think, of all the equine choices you could make in this moment, he could have chosen a stallion, could have chosen a war horse, some lovely thoroughbred, a racing horse, maybe a good strong mare, a dependable cart horse. I'd have gone with a noble shire horse personally. Or even if you were going to pick a donkey, you'd pick some dependable, reliable, steadfast donkey, wouldn't you? Not the colt, the untamed, unridden colt.

But this is classic Jesus for me. Radical, outrageous humility. This is the God of the universe and the God of the colt. Because Jesus is riding into Jerusalem as a king, but it's not the king or the kingdom that anybody expected. It's not the great military leader that people were hoping for. This is a kingdom of peace, of gentleness, of humility, of changing the world through changing the heart one by one, of breaking us free from sin and giving us salvation, giving us a chance to link back with God. That's not the kingdom anyone was expecting.

So why on earth does Jesus do this? I want to suggest there are kind of four reasons, I think. The first reason for choosing the donkey colt, I would say, is that it's prophetic. Say that again. Prophetic, not pathetic. Because we had a funny misunderstanding in our household a few weeks ago where one of the children misheard that and was like, are you saying I'm pathetic? Like, no, no, no. I mean, you could see it as a fairly pathetic choice of horse, but I don't mean that. It's prophetic.

It links to our first reading in Zechariah 9, verses 9 to 10. And that's interesting to just pause there a moment, because it is incredible that Jesus fulfils so many, all of the Old Testament prophecies. The Old Testament scrolls were written several hundred years before Jesus was born, and yet the elements of his life fulfil all of those prophecies. There is a professor in America, his name is Professor Peter Stoner, who did some mathematical research into what are the chances that eight of the Old Testament prophecies would be fulfilled. And he picked some of the easier ones, like riding on a donkey into Jerusalem is one of them, as opposed to the mega ones like the resurrection.

And he got his class to calculate the mathematical probability that any one life could happen to fulfil eight of those prophecies. And they calculated it as being one in a hundred quadrillion. That research was reviewed by the American Scientific Affiliation. Because I know sometimes you think, what is this? Is this fake news? I just want to read to you what the American Scientific Affiliation said.

"This work has been reviewed by members of the American Scientific Affiliation and its Executive Council and has been found in general to be dependable and accurate in regard to the scientific material presented. The mathematical analysis included is based upon principles of probability, which are thoroughly sound, and Professor Stoner has applied these principles in a proper and convincing way."

The thing is, it's not that amazing, because he didn't just fulfil eight. He fulfilled over 300, depending how you calculate them, because it's things like where there are multiple prophecies for the same thing. Does that count as one or as several? So it depends how you count them. But that's the thing. The odds are even greater than the one in 100 quadrillion. But I think it's not just that.

Because think about it. The prophecy could have been that he rode on a war horse. That would have made a lot more sense. It could have been specific. Like he rode on a war horse but it had one white foot or something. So that can't be all of it, right?

So there's reason number one, it's prophetic. Reason number two, I want to suggest, is it's symbolic. It's symbolic of the level of humility that our God holds to. Because at first thought, I'm like, this is ridiculous. Why is Jesus riding on a donkey colt? What's that about? But then you step back and you think of it broader and you think, we're saying this is God of the universe, God in human form, God stooping to take on human form. That is an even greater level of humility. Paul sums this up beautifully. Classically, Paul sums it up better than anyone. So I'm just going to read to you. I'm just going to jump for a moment to the book of Colossians, verse 1, chapters 15 to 20, where Paul says this. He's describing Jesus. Trying to explain how amazing Jesus is. He says this:

"Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the firstborn son, superior to all created things. For through him, God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. Christ existed before all things, and in union with him, all things have their proper place. He is the head of his body, the church. He is the source of the body's life. He is the firstborn son who was raised from death in order that he alone might have the first place in all things. For it was by God's own decision that the son has in himself the full nature of God. Through the Son then, God decided to bring back the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's sacrificial death on the cross and so brought back to himself all things both on earth and in heaven."

So that's who Jesus is. And when you think that that Jesus chooses, chooses this method. Chooses to be born as a baby, to be a refugee, to come from the backwater of Bethlehem, to be an itinerant preacher in the first century, and then to submit to Roman execution and die on the cross for us, if that is our God, then suddenly the level of humility that chooses a donkey colt doesn't seem so extraordinary after all. Feels like classic Jesus. This humility, though, I just also want to unpick it. It's not the same as humiliation.

Sometimes we don't like the thought of humility because we think, oh, that's just that horrible, embarrassed feeling when I just feel rubbish about things. It's not like that with Jesus. Jesus knows his worth and his place, and he carries this amazing, quiet authority, a gentle majesty. It's a strong humility. And so when God and I'll pick later and I'll say you know God calls us to humility it's the same he's not calling you to humiliation he's calling you to have a sense that you are a beloved child of God that the whole plan of him dying on the cross was to buy connection with you and that however the world makes you feel you are a son or daughter of God and it's in the strength that you can then be completely humble, having that quiet dignity and strength that comes from God. I've got two more.

Those are kind of classic interpretations. I'm going out on a limb now. Number three, I kind of feel there's a practical reason for the choice of the donkey colt. You see, as part of our theology, we understand that Jesus became a sacrifice for our sin. And the mechanism works because he never sinned. He was sinless. He was without any blame. Now, is it because not sinning was easy for Jesus? Because he's God. Well, it can't be that because then it wouldn't be an achievement, you know? So it can't have been easy for Jesus. And in fact, the Bible says that he was tempted in all the ways that we are tempted. So it's not easy for Jesus to not sin. He's got just the same propensity to sin as you and I.

So then it makes sense to me that at this moment when he's going into Jerusalem and he knows it's a triumphal entry to an adoring crowd that will throw down their cloaks and palm branches and worship him, that he takes a real practical step to be humble. To just be real, to be grounded. And I think there's a massive challenge for us there also to be careful of those moments when we're likely to get pumped up with pride and ego and to practically find ways to just ground ourselves.

And there's a fourth thing, a fourth reason I want to suggest. I just feel like Jesus loves a colt. And I'll unpack that a little bit. I think for some of us, especially classically in this service, some of us are parents to colts, right? I mean, they're wild and they're untamed, yeah? I've got three small children. Some of them are wild or untamed much of the time. And sometimes we sort of feel this anxiety about that. Jesus loves, Jesus chooses the wild and the untamed. Some of us are parents for colts, you know, we know that. And some of us are colts. Yeah, I am the wild and untamed one.

And some of us, you know or love a colt. They're way more than four years old, but they're still very much a colt. I feel like the disciple Peter was a colt. There's a colt. You know, he always just ran forward and did things without thinking. Jesus loves a colt. Society isn't always kind to colts. And sometimes, if we're totally honest, churches aren't entirely kind to colts. Jesus loves a colt. The wild, the untamed, the unruly. That is exactly what Jesus chooses.

Okay let's go on and think a little bit about that crowd what are the crowds doing because they're pretty extraordinary they are laying down their cloaks and spreading branches that they cut in the fields on the road. Now, when I was preparing this I was thinking I genuinely thought this I wouldn't chuck my cloak down for anyone so I'm so impressed Steve Jones you laid your coat on the floor as Joe did that procession. Honestly, it spoke to me. I was like, wow. I was thinking about this. I was thinking, what environment would I lay my cloak down? And the only one I could think of was with a woman in labour. I was like, I would lay my cloak for that. But not much else.

I wonder, would you have a little look at your coat this morning? Best coat in the room, by the way, is Chrissy's. You should see it on the way out if you haven't. For what would you lay that in the dust? Would you? And think of it. This is first century. This is a time for washing machines and tumble dryers. And if these people have been following John the Baptist, they only had one cloak because they'd already got rid of their second one. You're laying down your one and only cloak in the road for Jesus. It's amazing, isn't it? It is worship. It is homage. It is sacrifice. It is devotion.

And it links through the Old Testament scriptures. It's a little parallel for 2 Kings 9 verse 13, where Jehu's fellow officers, where when he is selected as king, they instantly take off their cloaks and they lay them on the steps for him. And it's a sign of saying, you are our king. We accept you as our king. But I feel slightly awkward about this crowd because for all they've absolutely nailed worship in this moment, you go just a few days down the line and some of them are part of the same crowd that's calling crucify him because some of the people in the crowd are just following the crowd.

The crowd that on Palm Sunday says, brilliant, Jesus, we worship you, you're the king, and then just a few days later goes, I don't know about this guy after all, I've changed my mind, I'm not sure he's anything much. I'll probably go along with what everyone else is saying. He is a weirdo, get rid of him, crucify him. And that is so true still now of human opinion, right? I mean, you only have to look at how fast opinion polls can change, how quickly we get through prime ministers these days, you know, the length of term of prime minister has reduced massively, how quickly we can change our minds or the tide of public opinion can turn. Human praise can be pretty fleeting and that is why it's always better for us to depend on a steady God for our appraisal and judgement than the court of human opinion.

So, I'm coming into land now. I wonder, what do we do with this hugely familiar story? What do we do with it this week? I want to suggest using the crowd, some places where you might be and how you might take it forward. Maybe you're right at the back of the crowd, cloak on. You're like, I'm not laying that down. I don't know who this Jesus is and I'm not quite sure yet. And that's fine. Jesus doesn't like force himself on anyone take your time but I would just say keep an eye on this Jesus keep studying this Jesus I've been studying him really all my life and I still encounter new things that change my mind things that flip my prior knowledge because he is so unexpectedly brilliant. His kingdom is so unlike what our world would tell us about power and authority. And he's fundamentally attractive in that. So keep your eyes on Jesus and just commit to like, I need to work out what I think about this guy. Because he's fascinating.

Secondly, maybe you're like, you are a worshipper but maybe you feel a little bit convicted like, oh, I am one of those worshippers that I'm all there some days, but I'm really not the others. I follow the crowd. I just so easily go with the tide of public opinion. Or maybe you think, yeah, it's so easy to worship on Palm Sundays, right? The bands sound amazing and you're there, but it is hard to worship in the Good Fridays of our life when we don't understand. Think about that first Good Friday for the disciples. For all Jesus had tried to prepare them with some hints, they did not know what was going on. They were like, what? We thought you were the Messiah. We thought you were the king. We were like all ready for this. And now you're being arrested and beaten up and put on trial and crucified. This does not look like anything that we were expecting.

Now, we all have the benefit of wisdom later. We know that was the whole plan of God from the start. It's the amazing breaking through of connection with God and the kingdom of God. But for them, it must have looked like everything was over. It would have made no sense. So easy to worship on the Palm Sundays, but can you still worship when it doesn't make sense the other times of life?

And then thirdly, because I know you guys are all saints and so many of you are all in: you have laid your cloaks down and you're all in every part of life you are there that's what makes you such a glorious congregation. But I think there is a challenge to us this morning about taking steps that, like Jesus, are not just symbolic but they're practical, about reshaping your life around Jesus and his way, which is a way of love and radical humility. And we can all continue to be challenged by that. This might be a midlife crisis, but I've taken up surfing. Don't laugh. And I've got to the level where I'm all right in the beginner session. In the beginner session, on the little waves, I can stand on the board and I ride it in. And I feel like I'm flying. So on Friday, I tried the improver lesson. Turns out it's not that easy in fact it's really hard you're right back to feeling pretty rubbish at it again but as I was sat out because I had to sit out I thought this is so much like a life of discipleship to Jesus right that there are times maybe early years where you're cruising you're like I've got this I've got this I'm pretty good at this and then Jesus hits you with new challenges, new seasons in your life, or he calls you into a deeper level of relationship, and all of a sudden you're right back at the start of, oh man, this is really hard. It's tough. But actually, we should be encouraged because there's so much growth going on there.

Jesus humbled himself, and Jesus is king. So if Jesus is your king, if he is king of your life, then he calls us to be sacrificial, servant-hearted like him. If we're going to honour him as king, we will be truly humble. It reminds me of my favourite verse in the Bible, which is Micah 6, verse 8. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.



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