

# **Palm Sunday | The two parades**

*MUC@10, 29 March 2026*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 21:1-11*

In many churches around the world, today's story will be called 'The Triumphal Entry', and it will be told with great pomp and dignity. Perhaps you've been at one of these services. The choir slowly processes down the aisle, solemnly singing, then priests wearing exquisite garments follow behind as acolytes waft incense everywhere. The church is aflutter with beautiful banners; and a pipe organ contributes sparkling notes. The congregation stands in their Sunday best and joins in the hymn: Glory! Praise! Honour! and Hosanna! – which means, Lord, save us!

The media commentator Marshall McLuhan once famously observed that the medium is the message. That is, how we tell our stories, the technology we use, and the surroundings we are in, all communicate far more than the story itself.

'Here is our king!' the fancy processions say, 'Hosanna! Lord, save us now!' But told in the setting of a beautiful colonial building with golden candlesticks, costly robes, a paid choir, and a fancy chair up on a dais like a throne, the message communicated is that Jesus is just like the emperor. Only, you know, he's our guy. And I suggest that this sort of parade also communicates the saving power of the white establishment, old money, conservative government, and patriarchal power.

But some of us – women, say, or children or Indigenous folk or queer folk or people with disabilities or people of colour – have at times found the establishment wanting. Indeed, some of us have learned that the establishment does not always seem to have our best interests at heart. In fact, the establishment seems quite good at shutting out people like us, and so some of us might wonder if a Jesus made in the image of the establishment can really save us.

Personally, I don't think this Jesus can. This is why I look very closely at the gospel account, and what I notice is this: that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is not particularly triumphant, whatever title your bible gives the story. In fact, the way Jesus enters Jerusalem makes a mockery of all that is serious, pompous and self-important; it rejects any conflation with power and wealth. For Jesus actually looks pretty foolish and his entry is ridiculous. If the medium is the message, then a guy riding a wee donkey and hailed by nearly naked peasants isn't another emperor. Instead, our guy is a clown.

What do I mean by this? Well, when a ruling authority comes to town, there is a ritual. When I was little, the Queen came to Australia. People lined the streets and waved little flags as her motorcade drove by. According to strict protocols, she visited the governor, attended Parliament House, and surveyed her realm. Similarly,

the entrance of a first century VIP to a city has an order too. First, they come in riding a noble beast. So does Jesus come in riding a warhorse or stallion? No, he does not. Instead, we are told, he enters riding a colt, that is, a young donkey. We don't know how young the colt is, exactly, but we are told that it had never been ridden before. Now, one of my kids spent years not only riding horses, but training young horses to be ridden by others. And what we learned is that horses which haven't been ridden before really, really don't like it. This little colt's probably heehawing and complaining and bucking and farting and skipping sideways and doing everything it can to try and tip Jesus off. There is definitely a hint of performance here, and of foolishness, and of Jesus deliberately clowning around.

What happens next? Well, when they get inside the city, a VIP is welcomed with elaborate speeches from local dignitaries. So, does Jesus receive this elaborate welcome? No, he does not. In fact, he's a complete unknown. The people ask, 'Who is this?' because they've got no idea. And to Jerusalem, 'the city that kills the prophets' (Matthew 23:37), the crowds reply, 'This is the prophet: Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.'

It's even more of a joke if we remember John's account. Nathanael asks, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1:46). Nathanael clearly doesn't think so, and that the question was asked in this way tells you the answer: nope, not at all, what a joke! So again, we see mockery and foolishness. Jesus, the great nobody from nowhere, is riding into town. No one has heard of him, and his supporters risk his life by outing him as a prophet.

Finally, in a classic entry sequence, a first century VIP heads straight to a temple and performs a public act of ritual sacrifice of the biggest, most expensive animals possible. But what does Jesus do? Well, looking ahead in Matthew's story, he indeed goes straight from parade to temple, but not to engage in sacrifice. Instead, he embodies another prophet's word. He throws out the moneychangers who, at rip-off rates, turn Roman coin into Jewish offerings. Then he kicks out the traders who, at inflated prices, sell birds for sacrifice. Then he heals a few blind people and a few lame people, and this enrages the religious authorities. And it's all a bit pointless, because the minute he walks out, I am sure that the moneylenders and bird sellers and religious authorities immediately shake themselves off, right the tables, sweep the floor, and go back to business as usual. Again, Jesus looks foolish, even futile.

Then, of course, there's the cloak thing. In first century Palestine, people only wore two garments. Take off your outer garment, and you're left with a loose tunic. Socially, you're regarded as naked; it'd be like me preaching in my petticoat. The story tells us that people took off their outer garments and spread them on the road

for Jesus to make his entrance. In other words, you have a bloke on a wacky ride surrounded by a bunch of nearly naked folk waving stuff and singing.

Putting it all together, we see that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is not a highly serious and dignified procession. His noble beast is an obstreperous little donkey; nobody knows him so he's outed as a prophet; his blood sacrifice comes later, when he offers up his own body; and his vanguard is not rank upon rank of trained soldiers carrying high tech military gear, but a messy crowd of scruffy folk parading in their underwear.

'Hosanna!' these people sing, 'Save us!' as they walk and sing and maybe even vogue. They are a parody of neo-Nazis, ICE agents, riot police and stern religious types who have no sense of humour and not one spark of joy. They're a parody of every army, ever, and every general and his parade. It's playful, joyful, vulnerable, disruptive, subversive; I suggest the modern equivalent is a pride parade.

So through the medium of the palm procession, Jesus takes the VIP entrance narrative and explodes it. We see a king riding an animal signifying peace; a king without weapons; a king without defences. He leads no army, just a ragged crowd of people all too often rejected and despised by the establishment. He's a king whose only wealth is love. He's a king who borrows food to set a table in the wilderness; a king who invites scruffy people to dine with him and to partner in his work. His arrival is a show of vulnerability and foolishness; it's street theatre, a jester's joke.

And so we learn that Jesus is not a new and improved emperor, marching in to take possession of a city through the ruling establishment. Instead, he's a jester coming in to subvert it. And what does this jester ultimately seek? Not riches or domination but the world's healing, the world's salvation: and this begins among the marginal folk who place their trust in him.

The triumphal entry? You can call it that, but Jesus' entrance is more anti-climax, a raspberry, a fart. We want God to send us a powerful leader who will make everything right; what we get is a jester, a fool. We want a quick and easy fix; what we get is to enter into the long, slow work of love. We want a reason to believe; what we get is an invitation to join the parade, knowing we might still deny him, knowing we might still shout, 'Crucify!' And even if we manage not to get swept up by the mob, success is not guaranteed and being noticed by the establishment may lead to our own persecution.

For, like a failed joke, we have to admit that the Palm Parade ends with a fizzle. We are entering Holy Week with carnival joy, but we are riding straight into failure, betrayal, suffering, and death. Everything about Palm Sunday points to paradox. Joy and devastation, loyalty and betrayal, hope and despair are intermingled; the

king will kneel to serve. Adoring crowds soon cry ‘Crucify!’; good people suffer; god dies.

Of course, we can reject this story of paradox. We can reject its humiliation, its indignity, its bad taste, and we can worship a patriarchal god. We can adopt a theology of domination wedded to wealth, power, and the white establishment, and many people, including very many who call themselves Christian, do.

But this Palm Sunday, I invite you to embrace the scruffiness, the foolishness, and the paradox of Jesus. Because I have a hunch that the jester has yet another joke up his sleeve: a joke involving a tomb which becomes a womb, a death which births life, a disappearance which creates a new community of love. And I have a hunch that salvation cannot be achieved through the powers that be, but only through the slow healing of people and communities who are doing the hard transformative work of love.

So let us worship the jester-king who, through the paradox of serious play, upends our expectations and skewers our self-importance. Let us bow down to the one who, through the paradox of servant leadership, shows us how to love one another. And let us offer our whole selves to the one who, through the paradox of the wounded healer, blesses and reconciles all things. Not just the nice bits, the faithful bits, the pretty bits, or the good bits, but the bits which betray and deny and despair; the bits which have no hope.

For I have a hunch that, through the jester, God really does save us. All we need to do is lay down our weapons, our wealth, our privilege and our dignity, and join in the parade. Blessed be God, King, Jester and Advocate: Amen. Ω