

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
April 2, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

### Palm Sunday: Readings and Reflections

#### **Matthew 21:1-10**

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’*

*This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,  
‘Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*‘Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

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We have heard and acted out this story so often that sometimes we don’t understand the excitement that must have infected Jesus followers and the crowds in Jerusalem. Imagine if Taylor Swift or the Ottawa Senators were coming to church one Sunday! And you didn’t even need to buy an expensive ticket, you just had to be there. Jesus was a big deal, and everyone was talking about him, how he healed and nourished and changed people’s hearts.

Or imagine if someone found a full-proof, no fail instant cure for COVID! Jesus’ teachings offered hope and healing to people who had been oppressed for 300 years. Finally someone who talked about the people and what they needed, instead of what the empire demanded of them.

Using your imagination, you can put yourself on the streets of Jerusalem that day when Jesus rode into town and the people tore branches off the trees to greet him, and even laid their coats on the road to make a path for him.

With Matthew telling the story, one thing you notice is that Jesus had a plan. When the disciples came to him asking about Passover in Jerusalem, he knew what he wanted: If King Herod or the Roman governor Pilate arrived in the city, they would have ridden big horses and chariots, with a hundred soldiers guarding them. They would stay in a palace and they would eat at fine banquets.

So Jesus chose the exact opposite. Riding a borrowed donkey, he showed the crowds that his vision was not the empire of Rome, or Herod’s grand palace. Going to the upper room and sharing a simple meal, even on the special day of Passover, that demonstrated that he would always be the son of a

carpenter. In him they found someone who came from their God, the God of a faithful and just people. Hosanna! Hosanna to the one who comes in the name of our God!

### **Matthew 21:12-17**

*Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written,*

*"My house shall be called a house of prayer";  
but you are making it a den of robbers.'*

*The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read,*

*"Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies  
you have prepared praise for yourself"?''*

*He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*

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You might be asking "Why were they selling animals and running a bank in the courts of the temple?"

Their answer would be a lot like the answers we hear around churches today: "Because we've always done it that way."

It seems to be human nature for us to build up an institution around any good idea. It is sometimes hard for us to remember that, before there was a church, there was a table. And it was an open table. It was the table where Zaccheus ate with the saviour. It was the table where Mary Magdalene, who was plagued by mental illness, was able to sit with Jesus and find her demons gone. It was the table where children were blessed, and lepers were part of the family again and sinners were honoured guests.

So Jesus entered the temple courts, and he saw that God's tables were being used to charge people temple taxes and to sell sacrificial animals and to exploit the ordinary people, the ones who only came to the temple, to worship God in prayer.

I don't think he asked why the holy tables were being used in this way. He probably already knew what the answer would be: "Because we've always done it that way. Because the temple needs this profit to survive. Because we are the experts and you are just some provincial riff raff who doesn't know how things work in the real world. Who are you to question our traditions?"

So instead Jesus overturned their tables. He sent their coins and their animals and their self-righteous attitudes flying. He said instead: "But God and the prophets and the faithful we know that these tables really belong to a house of prayer."

He didn't impress the authorities, however, and they started to look for a way to get rid of Jesus forever.

### **Matthew 21:42-45**

*Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:*

*"The stone that the builders rejected*

*has become the cornerstone;*

*this was the Lord's doing,*

*and it is amazing in our eyes"?*

*Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'*

*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.*

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Matthew is recording these words long after the death of Jesus, possibly as many as three or four generations later. The temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, and all that was left constituted a lot of stumbling blocks, large broken stones to trip up anyone who dared to return to the holy centre of their faith.

Jesus quoted from an even older source when he used the words of the Psalm, and they were words that the people around him must have known well: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.*

The first stone laid in any new structure was the cornerstone, and it was chosen very carefully. It had to bear the weight of the whole structure, and guaranteed its longevity. It also served as a reference point for laying all the other stones around it.

Many stones were rejected or not found to be worthy of being a cornerstone. That is what the authorities had done with Jesus. He wasn't wealthy enough. He didn't come from the right family. He was a Galilean, an outsider, one of the fringe.

In the same way as that ancient tradition of building from the cornerstone out, Jesus' teachings, his truths and his parables, are now the reference point for us as we try to understand which way to turn.

Which way to turn when we do not get what we want. Which way to rebuild when we do get what we want but it doesn't satisfy us. Which cornerstone to choose when it seems like all around us is broken and we need a new hope.

May the stories of Jesus entering Jerusalem, and facing his opponents give us courage for the Holy Week journeys we all encounter. Thanks be to God.