“HOSANNA TO THE SON OF DAVID!”

Matthew 21:1–17

Key Verse: 21:9

“The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ‘Hosanna in the highest heaven!’”

The main theme of Matthew’s Gospel is that Jesus is our King. In chapter 1 Matthew records a genealogy to prove that Jesus is the Son of David. In chapter 2 he contrasts the birth of Jesus, the true King, with Herod, a false king. And then Matthew shows us how, throughout his ministry, Jesus was always talking about the kingdom. Now, through entering Jerusalem Jesus makes a public declaration that he’s King of the kingdom. But he’s not like a king we’d usually think of. Today we want to learn what kind of King Jesus is, and what it means practically to live with him as our King. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verse 1a. Jesus has been traveling with his disciples on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. This road was built by the Roman army. It was about 18 miles long and climbed 3,000 feet. The end of the road reaches the Mount of Olives, which is just across a valley east of Jerusalem. The towns of Bethphage and Bethany are on the southeast side of the mount. It was Sunday, the start of Passover Week, and many pilgrims were also traveling on this road to Jerusalem for the celebrations. Jesus chose this time and place to do something special.

Read verses 1b,2. Jesus was asking two disciples to bring him a mother donkey and her colt. Somehow Jesus knew that, right at the entrance to that village, these two animals were there. Obviously they didn’t belong to him, but he wanted them. Why? As we see in today’s event, Jesus wanted to ride one of them into the city. He wanted to ride the colt, but to get it to do so, he wanted the mother to go along with them as well. We’ll think more about that later. But right now, he’s trying to get these two disciples to carry out this task. Read verse 3. Jesus was making it clear that he was just borrowing these animals, not taking them. But what’s most important here is his explanation: “The Lord needs them.” Jesus is referring to himself as “the Lord.”

What does this mean? It means that Jesus the King is actually the Owner of all things. As King and Lord he has the right to use anything or anyone, at any time, for his own purposes. To live with him as our King and Lord means to be ready and willing to serve him at any time, in any way, with whatever we have. We live in a society where most people live as their own lords. They center their lives around themselves. They try to be in control of everything. But Christian life is just the opposite. Christian life is centered on Jesus as King and Lord, we live for him, we let him be in control, and we humbly trust and obey him.

Throughout his Gospel Matthew tells us that things happened “to fulfill” what was spoken through a prophet (1:22; 2:15,17,23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 26:54,56; 27:9), and he does it again here, in verse 4. Why? Matthew is telling us that in the coming of Jesus, God was in control, keeping all his promises. He’s showing us that Jesus is the Messiah, the King God promised to send. But in this case, in entering Jerusalem Jesus is intentionally fulfilling a prophecy. Read verses 4,5. This was the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. It was an unusual prediction. The Messiah, the promised King, would not be like any other king. He’s gentle, so gentle that he rides on a colt, the foal of a donkey, to meet his people. Gentle is not how most men would like to be described, and it’s usually not how we describe a king. A king is authoritative and powerful. But King Jesus is gentle. He’ll never harm us; he only wants to make friends with us. Matthew was so moved by the gentle character of Jesus. He’s the only Gospel writer who recorded Jesus’ words: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (11:28).

Generally, we sinful human beings are proud and rebellious. But God sent his Son to us so humbly and gently. He came as King to rule us not with force but with love. When we realize how gentle he is, we can open our hearts to him. We can trust him. We can come to him just as we are. We can find refuge in him.

What happened next? Read verses 6–8. As soon as Jesus sat on that baby donkey, the very large crowd that was there got really excited. They knew that Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem as their King. They spread their cloaks or branches on the road to pay their highest honor to him.

And they were so happy they started shouting. Read verse 9. “Hosanna!” means “Praise God!” Simply speaking, they were so thankful to have Jesus as their King. They were so thankful God had kept all his promises to send him. They were so thankful he was such a humble, gentle king, a king of love like David. Many people don’t really know what kind of king David was. But David was, above all else, a shepherd king. He shepherded Israel with integrity of heart (Ps78:72). His shepherd heart for his people can be best seen before he became king, when he was running for his life from King Saul. At that time David had to hide in a cave. But at that very time, all those who were in distress or in debt or discontented came to him, and he became their leader (1Sa22:1,2). He cared for those people more than he cared for himself. He was with them and helped them until many of them were changed and became known as David’s mighty men (2Sa23; 1Ch11). In short, David loved God with all his heart, and he truly loved people. He was just an imperfect shadow of Jesus. Jesus’ coming as the Son of David was what God’s people had been waiting for, for so long.

And there’s a deeper meaning to their praises of King Jesus. In Hebrew the word “hosanna” originally meant “save us!” Though these people probably didn’t mean this, it was what they were shouting. And it was exactly why Jesus came. As the angel said at his birth, Jesus came “to save his people from their sins” (1:21b). Jesus was entering Jerusalem as King to become our Savior. He would do that in a way nobody expected. He would suffer and die on a shameful cross and shed all his blood, to give us God’s forgiveness. Many people try to be a savior; they try to rescue people from their problems. But only Jesus is our true Savior. Only Jesus can save us from our real problem, our sins, and bring us to God’s kingdom. To welcome Jesus as our King, with shouts of praise, we need to experience his salvation very personally. So often we think our problem is outside us, like a tragedy, or our finances, or other people, or a system. But our real problem is within us: our own sins. Only when we realize our own sins and put our trust in Jesus can we experience his saving grace. This, too, is at the core of Christian life. We need to know Jesus as “my Savior.”

Look at verse 10. Here the word “stirred” in Greek is literally “shaken.” These people were so shaken by Jesus entering as King because they were not ready for him. Though they’d heard about his ministry for the past 3.5 years, they had not turned their hearts to him; they refused to repent. So his coming shook their own plans, their own security, their own human kingdoms.

When he entered Jerusalem what did Jesus do first? Read verse 12. What happened to gentle Jesus? This is not gentle. At first it’s hard to understand what he’s doing. But our King Jesus is showing us that to him, the worship of God is so important. In our lives we put so many other things as our priority. In fact, worship can seem like a duty, or a chore, or even an option. But to Jesus, worship is at the heart of spiritual life. And Jesus wasn’t looking at mere outward activities or appearances. It seemed that many people were at the temple worshiping God. But Jesus could see through it all; he could see people’s hearts. What they were really interested in was not worshiping God but their own benefit.

How so? Well, they were using the temple courts to buy and sell animals for sacrifice. At Passover, people were supposed to bring a lamb as an offering. If they were too poor, they could bring a pair of doves or two young pigeons. People got so clever, they decided to buy and sell these animals right in the temple courts, no doubt at a higher price for the convenience. Some probably were pretending to be poor. Jewish pilgrims came for Passover from all over the Roman Empire. So they had foreign currencies that needed to be exchanged. Those selling and changing money were making a profit off of the worship of God. And those buying were able to worship much more conveniently. But God was not pleased. God doesn’t want us to worship him superficially, but from our hearts. God doesn’t want us to seek personal gain from worshiping him; he wants us to worship him in spirit and in truth. We need to take this seriously.

What’s worse, they were buying and selling right in the temple courts. The exact location was known as “the Court of the Gentiles.” It was the one place in the temple area where Gentiles, the people who didn’t know God very well, could come and pray to him and seek him. But God’s people had turned this precious place into something for themselves. They didn’t care about God’s heart for the Gentiles. They were only thinking of themselves and their own children and their own enjoyment. To be honest, their worship had become godless. Jesus rebuked them, drove them out and overturned their tables and benches.

Read verse 13. Jesus taught clearly that God’s house should be a house of prayer, not a place of personal business. He also taught that seeking personal benefit or gain from church is like robbing God. When we come to him, we should put aside all our other issues and concerns and really pray to God, to listen to his voice and seek his face. And when we come to God, we should not be trying to get something, but trying to give something. Worship is not about outward activities, but about having a prayerful, giving heart to God.

After Jesus put them all out of the temple courts, what did he do? Read verse 14. This is recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel. Again, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ healing ministry. The blind and the lame were usually not permitted in the temple, but Jesus welcomed them. It tells us that Jesus wants his church to be used not as a gathering for self-righteous people seeking personal benefit, but as a place of God’s mercy for spiritually sick people to get well (9:12,13).

What happened next? Read verses 15,16a. Here we see two groups: on the one hand, there’s the wonderful things Jesus did, and the children enjoying his humble, gentle character; on the other hand, there’s the angry religious leaders. They were so upset because they were jealous of Jesus. They thought *they* were the ones who should be praised, not Jesus. And Jesus’ style of ministry was so different from theirs. Their pride made them so spiritually blind that they were even trying to say Jesus was tolerating heresy. How did Jesus answer them? Read verse 16b. Even the children’s praises were fulfillment of prophecy. And they show again that it’s people whose hearts are like little children who can welcome Jesus as King (11:25; 19:14).

Today we learned that Jesus is our Lord, our gentle King, our Shepherd and our Savior, who wants us to worship God truly and care for others. May God make us like children to welcome him joyfully, with all our hearts.