

**Who is This?**  
**Matthew 21:1–11**  
**April 10, 2022**  
**Palm Sunday**

Around two decades ago, we had opportunity to do evangelism at a French university. Our local hosts arranged to have a classroom at the university in Montpellier, to which we invited students to join us for a conversation about Jesus Christ. My friend Jean Cartier, a local church elder, translated as I asked the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” One said, “Son of Socrates.” Another, “Brother of Aristotle.” Typically, Jesus was considered a good man, a miracle worker, a prophet, and a significant religious figure. Only until one said, “Son of God,” did the conversation begin to aim toward the right mark.

It was stunning to hear some of the responses to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” And yet, I need not have been surprised, given only one-half of one percent attended evangelical churches in France. Yet, I wonder, how would people we work with and live near and interact with in our community answer the same question? But let’s aim tighter. How would you answer that question? Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They responded, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. Then He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16).

Not all agree. I read an article this week by a young lady working with female college students. As she walked with a student by a church, they read on a sign, “Jesus died on the cross for your sins.” The student remarked, “Well that’s sad and morbid.”<sup>1</sup> Like the student, we cannot presume that those around us, maybe some in our families or extended families, understand who Jesus is.

As Jesus neared Jerusalem, his triumphal entry led boldly, openly to the cross—that sad and morbid sight, as the student thought. The crowds, despite seeing Jesus, were no better off than that student. They asked a legitimate question but most failed to answer it rightly. For some, it cost eternity. *How we answer their question—Who is this?—counts for everything.* How do you answer their question? It’s not a matter of knowing interesting Bible facts. Rather, responding to who Jesus is and what He has done, is the most important matter of life. Let’s think about it in this familiar story.

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<sup>1</sup> Kendal Conner, “3 Cultural Stories Shared by Gen Z and Gen Alpha Youth,” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cultural-stories-gen-z-alpha/>.

## I. An inadequate answer

Crowds already in Jerusalem for the Passover and those journeying in the human train with Jesus and the disciples, set the stage for seeing how Jesus threw aside secrecy to publicly head to the cross (Col. 2:13–15). Crowd estimates for the 1<sup>st</sup> century Passover range from a low figure of 180,000 to as much as 3 million, swelling the city of 25,000 into wall-to-wall people.<sup>2</sup> Imagine, as Jesus walked the road from Jericho, where He healed two blind men, 17 miles toward Jerusalem over a mountain pass, thousands took the same route on the way to celebrate the Passover. That ancient festival commemorated the Lord delivering Israel from bondage to Egypt, as the Passover lamb’s blood turned away the wrath of the death angel. Even that celebration pointed to the ultimate Passover, when God’s wrath would turn away from the elect through the offering of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, at the cross (1 Cor. 5:7). Along the way, they came to Bethphage, a village beside Bethany. John tells us that on the way, Jesus met up with Mary and Martha, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had previously raised from the dead (John 12). The crowds saw Lazarus and heard the excited chatter about the man who had been dead for four days having come to life at the command of Jesus. Jerusalem was stirring!

### 1. Questioning Jesus’ mission

**“When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred (literally, agitated, shaken like an earthquake), saying ‘Who is this?’ And the crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.’”** Jesus had been to Jerusalem before. People in the city knew who He was, for who else was healing the sick and casting out demons and countering the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and overthrowing the money changers in the temple? **“Who is this?”** is not a question of identity, as though they looked for a name they didn’t know. All Israel knew His name! News traveled throughout the small territory. News of this mighty man of God who miraculously fed multitudes, raised a widow’s son, healed the blind and lame, cast out demons, and raised Lazarus from the dead, spread like wildfire. That’s why Jesus had to regularly meet outside cities because the crowds became too overwhelming. It’s why He secreted Himself in the mountain and took a boat across the Galilee to find solace. As the crowds **“going ahead of Him, and those who followed,”** shouted Messianic praise, the people knew this was Jesus. But who is Jesus?

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<sup>2</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus*, 27, 77–84.

The question intended more than a name. The multitudes filling every nook and cranny of Jerusalem wanted to know *what is His mission?* They didn't ask, "What's his name?" Instead, "**Who is this?**" gets to the heart of what Jesus was doing receiving the praise of the crowds, why He came into Jerusalem as though a king, and how He had the courage to take such action that would rouse the Roman authorities and agitate the Jewish religious leaders. Don Carson said they were asking, "Who really is this about whom there is so much excitement?"<sup>3</sup>

Have you taken time to ask the question, who really is this Jesus Christ of the Bible? What is His mission? Why all the excitement for 2,000 years about Him? Does it matter if I know who Jesus really is and what Jesus actually did during His days on the earth? Even the disciples asked the question, after arousing Jesus from sleeping in the middle of wind and waves sinking the little boat they were in, "Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?" (Luke 8:25) Who is this? Have you considered Him?

## 2. A compliment that falls short

**"And the crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.'"** If one wanted to offer the highest compliment to a spiritual man, he was called a prophet. They expressed surprise that a prophet came from the backwoods village of Nazareth. Perhaps a few among them thought of the promise of the Messianic Prophet who would arise after Moses and replace him in authority, whom the people would follow (Deut. 18:15–15). But most probably settled in on the common explanation for this man who had no wealth or trappings of power or political interest, and yet did miracles and preached with unusual power—He's just a prophet but oddly, one from Nazareth in Galilee.<sup>4</sup> Their compliment fell short. Many continue to offer compliments about Jesus without confessing Him as Lord of all.

If Jesus is only a prophet, as Muslims would say, then you have no way to God other than to depend upon your personal acts of righteousness being sufficient to appease a God who is so holy, that with one sin by Adam and Eve, He brought humanity under condemnation. Do you want to trust yourself to rid the dark weight of sin? Or to raise you to a level of holiness by which God accepts you by your merit? If you would trust yourself, then it's apparent, you do not know yourself well and you certainly don't understand the holiness and justice of God. Yes, Jesus is the Prophet

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<sup>3</sup> Don Carson, *EBC: Matthew*, 2:440.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 2:440.

who would replace Moses. But more than a prophet. He is the Son of God who mediated the way to God as the eternal high priest, through offering Himself in your place before God's judgment at the cross. Who is this? This is Jesus the Prophet, Priest, and King, God's Son, who came to save sinners.

## II. A visible declaration

Don Carson calls the ride on the donkey's colt, "an acted parable, a deliberate act of symbolic self-disclosure for those with eyes to see." He adds, "Secrecy was being lifted."<sup>5</sup> As Jesus and those following Him approached Jerusalem, **"Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them.'"** One would expect a triumphant king to ride into the capitol city on a mighty horse, one battle worthy, so that he might portray power and authority with the people. Such would have been the norm in the Roman world. But not Jesus. A donkey's colt that had never been ridden was immediately tamed by Him who has power over all nature. The prophetic word in Isaiah 11:1–10 of the shoot springing from Jesse's stem came into vivid sight of all the crowd: The one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rested, who lived with the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, and knowledge, who would judge the poor with righteousness and slay the wicked with the breath of His lips, would bring in His kingdom in which the wolf and lamb, the leopard and young goat would live with each other.<sup>6</sup> Isaiah declares concerning the Messiah coming, "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Then in that day the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious" (Isa. 11:9–10). All this unfolded—*the now and the not yet*—before the eyes of the multitudes, as Jesus visibly declared His kingship.

### 1. Fulfills prophecy

We're to see, as we read the narrative, that Jesus is fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy eight centuries before, and Zechariah's prophecy 500 years before. What God promised, He unfolded in every

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<sup>5</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 2:437.

<sup>6</sup> See Carson, *Matthew*, 2:438, who writes, "This event points to the peace of the consummated kingdom."

detail according to the divine purpose to reveal His Son as the eternal King. **“This took place [i.e., Jesus riding on the donkey into Jerusalem] to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘Say to the daughter of Zion [i.e., Jerusalem’s daughter, a euphemism for the people of Israel], ‘Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden’”** (citing Isa. 62:11; Zech. 9:9). Does it take our breath away, that what was written hundreds of years before, *in that moment* came to life?<sup>7</sup> What God had spoken in His infallible Word, He did. That should encourage us to linger on the promises of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we struggle with doubt, look at Jesus riding the donkey’s colt to see how every detail of what God has purposed will take place.

What does it mean that prophetic declarations were fulfilled in minute detail hundreds of years later? That calls for us to pay attention to what God is doing in Jesus Christ. If we’re careless, brushing this off as an old story with no bearing on present life, we’re living in eternal danger. God gave us these prophetic words to know that Jesus alone fulfills the purpose of God. And Jesus alone, as the one fulfilling the prophetic word, is sufficient to cleanse us from sin and give us new hearts transformed and inclined to follow after the Lord God. Do you believe the prophets’ declarations concerning Jesus? Some in the multitudes did. Others didn’t, and later that week became part of the mob yelling for Jesus to be crucified.

## 2. Manifests humility

When we think about Jesus riding on a donkey’s colt, honestly, it doesn’t seem very impressive. Why not a great horse? Why not pomp and grandeur? Jesus didn’t come to impress us. He came to die on the cross to save us. That’s humble work by King Jesus. He approached Jerusalem with the cross in view. He knew where He would be five days later—on Calvary, crucified as though a criminal. But more, He knew He would be bearing our sins in His body on the cross. He understood that He would encounter God’s wrath for us, so that we might be counted righteous in Him. So, He humbly rides a donkey’s colt into the city, not a great horse as an emblem of royalty. The OT prophesied Messiah as the Suffering Servant (Ps. 22; 118:22; Isa. 53). While thousands would have welcomed crowning Jesus as king over Israel on that day of entering the city, He shunned it. He had a cross to bear before accepting the crown at the Father’s right hand. The King, **“gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden,”** accepted lowliness

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<sup>7</sup> Chuck Quarles, *EGGNT: Matthew*, 244, points out, “This is the ninth of ten formula quotations” in Matthew’s Gospel.

so that He might lift us up before God as His very own. Humility marked Jesus, so that all who follow Him might turn from the natural bent to pride and self-exaltation, to walk in humility as He did. He humbled Himself to hang on the cross that we might be humbled by the cross and know the pleasure of God as He did.

### **3. A reign like no other**

No Roman emperor would think of stooping to ride a donkey's colt—an untamed one at that, with the chance to get tossed off in front of everyone—as he entered the city to the accolades of its citizens. But Jesus did. **“Behold your King is coming to you,”** Zechariah prophesied. The prophet added, “He is just and endowed with salvation” (Zech. 9:9). No other king has been “endowed with salvation” to bestow salvation upon those for whom He died as the wrath-bearing, sin-absorbing Savior. But Jesus did.

Zechariah continued to describe this King who would be presented in triumph mounted on a donkey's colt, as the one who “will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River [the Euphrates] to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:10). That's prophetic language declaring that Jesus will do what no ruler has ever done. He will bring peace to the nations. Don't we need Him to rule over the nations, even now! Think of the mess that rulers have made through the centuries. Certainly, some good rulers have arisen through the centuries, but their imperfections, even with the best ones, have shown through their administrations. But not King Jesus. He will bring together those from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation whom He has redeemed by His bloody death, to live in peace forever (Rev. 5:9–10).

We're meant to ponder the contrast between the long line of kings, emperors, presidents, dictators, and rulers throughout history, with the King who rode the donkey's colt into Jerusalem. Will you follow Him? Or will you put your trust and eternity in the hands of the long list of rulers?

Do you follow King Jesus? To follow Him is to go the way of the cross, where you lay down self-rule, heart idols, and self-centeredness to receive the killing power of the cross on *self* and begin to live in the resurrection power of Jesus every day.

### **III. A triumphant mission**

People don't always say what they believe. They may speak truth, yet not believe the truth from the heart. How often in public settings outside church have we heard “Amazing Grace” sung?

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” True words, but only personally true if one has faith in Christ alone as Savior. The multitudes spoke truth as Jesus entered Jerusalem. They quoted Psalm 118 and cited, with great approval, 2 Samuel 7:13–16 about David’s son. Yet what did they believe concerning the truths that came out of their lips? Perhaps, that’s something for us to consider as we confess truth together through songs and reading God’s Word. Has the truth of the gospel taken root in our hearts?

### 1. Kingly acknowledgement

Once the disciples “**did just as Jesus instructed them,**” they laid their coats on the donkeys<sup>8</sup> and put Jesus on the colt. “**Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road.**” They sought to honor Jesus in a kingly way. But it wasn’t just the sign of coats and branches carpeting the road in royal fashion, just as the Romans would have done for an emperor’s visit. “**The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David.’**” That’s royal acclamation. *Son of David* implied one of David’s descendants who was now worthy to sit upon David’s throne to reign over them.

When Jesus fed the multitudes, they tried to take Him by force and make Him king (John 6:1–15). But Jesus withdrew from them. Later, when the crowd met up with Him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, He caused them to put the brakes on their cries for His kingship by telling them He was the bread from heaven, and only by eating this heavenly bread would they have eternal life. That life, Jesus told them, was His flesh offered in bloody death (John 6:41–58). They wanted no part of a king who would make such demands upon them. They simply wanted the loaves and fish, not the cross and following Him. He was not the kind of king they looked for.

It doesn’t take much to get a crowd stirred up. We saw that in Acts 19 in Ephesus, with the crowd chanting for two hours about a lifeless idol’s greatness. We’ve witnessed it in church services when a crowd acts excited about Jesus for a few hours. But the call of Jesus is not to make a spectacle or join the crowd. It’s a call to repent of sins, acknowledge our need for His cross-work, to believe in Him as the only Savior of sinners, and to go on following Him as King.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew alone mentions the mother donkey accompanying the colt. Jesus did not ride both! But the mother’s presence may have calmed the colt, according to a number of NT commentators.

## 2. A cry to save

“**Hosanna to the Son of David . . . Hosanna in the highest!**” We generally think of the word “hosanna” to mean *praise*. And so it does. But far more. The word originally meant, “God save us,” “please save,” and was used liturgically as a cry of joy and celebration, “God saves!” Craig Bloomberg adds that in that Messianic fervor, it meant, “praise be to the Messianic King.”<sup>9</sup> The crowd asked for Jesus, as the *potential Messianic King*, to save. But save from what? Most would have thought nationalistically—save us from Rome and the rest of our enemies. But few probably thought of the salvation Isaiah, Zechariah, or the psalmist spoke of as salvation from our sins and the judgment of God. In a sense, they proclaimed Jesus as the promised Messiah who would save them from their sins to live with eternal enjoyment in the promises of God. They even expressed this in a superlative: “**Hosanna in the highest!**” with the prepositional phrase indicating praise to God. They were right in what they said. But most failed to believe what they shouted.

Likewise, do you believe what we’ve just sung together?

O, mount of grace, to thee we cling, from the law hath set us free,  
Once and for all on Calva ry's hill love and justice shall agree,  
Praise the Lord, the price is paid, the curse defeated by the Lamb,  
We who once were slaves by birth, sons and daughters now we stand.<sup>10</sup>

## 3. Divine purpose

Paul preached “the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Jesus is the center of that purpose and the one whom the multitudes spoke about. “**Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!**” That was language of representation: Jesus represented God; His coming fulfilled the purpose of God as the one sent by the Father to accomplish redemption for His people.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Jesus, the one riding on the donkey’s colt, lived in the blessing of God. Yes, all true! But did they believe what they said? Did they put their trust in this One who is the humble King?

This story of Jesus is simple. He headed for the cross via this triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the city of His death and resurrection. Multitudes *said the right things* about Jesus. But they had not turned from their sin in repentance and put their trust in Jesus alone as their sin-bearing Savior

<sup>9</sup> Craig Bloomberg, “Matthew,” in G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 65. Bloomberg cites Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B, 595.

<sup>10</sup> Matt Papa & Matt Boswell, “O Fount of Love.”

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 523; Chuck Quarles, *Matthew*, 245.



and reigning King. They said the right things but did not take the step of faith to trust in and follow Jesus.

How about you? You've confessed the right things about Jesus over and over. You've done it through singing and Scripture reading. If someone were to ask you about Jesus, you would probably tell them the truth. But has the truth taken root in your heart? Do you have life in Him? Are you, right now, relying upon Jesus for forgiveness and following Him as Lord of your life? ***Who is this?*** Good question. More than how you answer with the right facts, do you confess, *This One, Jesus Christ, is my King and I follow Him?*