

What to Do About Jesus? 2023

Matthew 21:1-2, 6-11, 14-15, 27:15-22, 26

Matthew 21:1-2, 6-11, 14-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. 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!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” 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.

Matthew 27:15-22, 26 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Gospel of Matthew was written primarily for Jewish readers,
and so it’s main focus is on showing how Jesus fulfilled
the OT promises & hope that God would send the Messiah.

Demonstrating **that identity of Jesus** is the message of Matthew,
as it is gradually revealed by all that Jesus says and does,
and by the reactions of the crowds, of his disciples & critics.

Back just before they began their journey toward Jerusalem,
Jesus asked his disciples, “who do people say that I am?”,
and they told him all about what they had been hearing.

Then Jesus asks his disciples, “but who do **you** say that I am?”,
and in **Matthew 16:16**, Peter correctly identifies him,
“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Then Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples that in Jerusalem, he would suffer and die, and then be raised on the third day.

And all along their journey together toward Jerusalem, Jesus continued to reveal more about himself & his mission.

The Matthew 21 passage is to help the reader interpret and understand the events of the week, the Passion story and the meaning of Easter.

The triumphant entry story begins with Jesus and his disciples, as they're gathered near Bethany, the outskirts of Jerusalem. Jesus instructs two of the disciples to bring him an unriden colt, which is seemingly, just a minor matter of his transportation.

So why do you suppose, there is so much emphasis on the donkey?

It's because details of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey are described and foretold by the Old Testament prophets,

& makes the point that events of Palm Sunday, Holy Week & Easter were **all according to the will, plan and saving purpose of God**, in fulfillment of the prediction found in Zechariah, 9:9 & 16,

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. On that day the Lord their God will save them for they are the flock of his people...

The author of Matthew wants to make it very certain and clear, that just as getting the colt was all according to God's plan,

so too, all the other events of the passion story, were also on purpose and exactly as God planned...

... indicating, the crucifixion of Jesus was not random or accidental.

It was not a flash crowd suddenly caught up in the moment, **but absolutely deliberate, and exactly as God intended.**

It was all the working out of God's plan and good purpose all along, to love, bless, save, heal and show gracious mercy to lost sinners.

Just as God loved, planned, promised and fulfilled way back then, **so too** God is still at work and still accomplishing grace and good in our lives, in this church and in the world today, right now.

So we are precisely where and when God placed us to make a difference.

A man on the colt of donkey, was hardly the expected power-image of someone sent to transform the world, yet, as we read in vs. 10, 14-15

When he entered Jerusalem, **the whole city was in turmoil**, asking, "Who is this?" 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.

The Matthew chapter 27 reading, describes later that same week,

and after his betrayal, arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin.

Jesus is at the Praetorium for trial before Pilate,

who's grappling to resolve his important questions,

"who is this Jesus, and what to do about him?"

- Pilate acknowledges that Jesus has done nothing wrong

- Pilate's wife has sent him an urgent note of warning ... vs. 19

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

But despite wanting to heed his wife's warning about her dream,

Pilate buckles and bends under pressure from the crowd

though he was well aware that

the religious leaders were trying to manipulate him, vs. 18

For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

Pilate was warned, but he was afraid to stand firm with integrity,

so instead he goes along with the crowd and surrenders to his fear.

Therefore he is remembered for all time for condemning and

crucifying a man he knew to be righteous and innocent,

and thereby earning his place in the Apostle's Creed

"Suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Rather than Pilate taking responsibility to decide for himself,

he tried to punt and the crowd make the decision for him, vs. 15-17.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

It should have been an obvious slam dunk and easy decision,

but instead, the crowd chooses the notorious criminal - vs. 20

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.

When the crowd calls for Barabbas to be released,

Pilate asks the most important question of all time, vs. 22

Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"

The crowd deciding between Jesus and Barabbas has an OT connection.

Leviticus 16 describes two goats being presented at the Tabernacle.

One of the goats was killed as a sin offering on the Day of Atonement

and the other goat was released alive into the desert wilderness.

Do you see and recognize the connection?

Matthew's purpose was more than just telling about ancient history.

Jesus didn't just ride into Jerusalem 2000 years ago,
but he still rides into my life, and into your life today.
It's really not Jesus on trial at the Praetorium, **we are!**

The writer is asking us, the readers to answer a critical question,
"What will we do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

Pilate illustrates the darker side of us that seeks popular approval,
goes along with the crowd, and seeks easy compromise with the world.

Just as it was for Pilate and the crowd that day,
so too for us, those same two questions confront us all -
- who is Jesus, and what should I do about Jesus?

At various points, we all have to decide – we make our choice,
and choose how we are going to respond to Jesus,
either go along with the crowd or follow Jesus in truth.

It's a call to focus on our faith, as a response to God's grace.

It's not that you or I went out seeking the Lord,
or that we worked to earn or deserve God's grace...

... **but rather**, having experienced God's love, blessings & mercy,
I want to respond, to grow closer, to obey and to **enjoy**
this God who loves me and who went looking for me
and who found me even before I knew I was lost.

It is God's will & purpose to bless us, & the Lord has so arranged it,
for our relationship with God to give us joy, meaning and peace,
which happens when we use our gifts, our time, our lives
to glorify God by serving as the Lord shows us needs,
so I want whatever it is that God wants, intends & desires for me.

If Matthew's Gospel is true, then we must respond to its truth,
and so either we follow Jesus or we let him be crucified.
Everything leads to this final question in Matthew's gospel,
- who is Jesus, and what should I do about it?

Every committed, faithful and growing Christian I've ever known
could tell their stories about risky decisions they've made
in answer to Pilate's questions in Matthew:
"who is Jesus", and "what should I do about it?"

--and the way we answer will determine **our character**,
what sort of person we're going to be,
selfish and always looking out for number one,
or self-giving, following the way of Christ the Lord.

-- and the way we answer will determine how we **influence** our world
either we're part of the solution,
helping restrain evil and injustice as a light in the world,

or we're contributing to the problems in this world.
It all depends upon what we do about Jesus Christ, on our response,
for it is about God's relentless love and continuing call of grace.

So our call and our task for today and for every day we live.
is to be like the shouting followers at the triumphant entry
announcing the glorious coming King and that Jesus is Lord,
or we're more like the crowd, shouting, "Let him be crucified!"

Knowing the truth is not the same as doing the truth.

So when and where have I ever stood firm for Jesus Christ
despite the possible cost, despite the probable risk?

Today, for us, for each of us as we are moving into Holy Week,
as we are confronted by the terrible, the blood and cruelty
of the inhumane suffering and death that Jesus endured,
let that serve to remind us of the horror of sin and depravity,
and why we need a Savior, God's grace to accomplish what we cannot.

**We are, each of us, God's beloved children, precious to our King,
called and equipped to bring that Good News to all the world,
and to let the love of God shine through us by how we live.**

So who is Jesus, and what does he want for me?

The answer to that has the power to change our lives forever.

The critical question is this, "**What to Do About Jesus Christ?**"

Isaac Watts answered with a wonderful hymn in 1656:

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.
Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.