

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Matthew 21:1-11

NRSV

In Matthew, Jesus and his disciples travel to Jerusalem from the east, from Jericho (10:29). The “Mount of Olives” (21:1) is east of the city; “Bethphage” is one of the few villages on it. It is likely that “the village” (21:2) is Bethany, where Lazarus, Mary and Martha live.

The disciples are to find a “donkey” (21:2) with her “colt”, a “foal” (21:5). That the owner of the animals will send them “immediately” (21:3) suggests that he is a follower of Jesus. Jesus is “king” (21:5), but a “humble” one, not the political and military leader people expected. 21:7 says Jesus “sat on them”; perhaps he sits on the mother donkey, and the “foal” trots alongside.

Matthew, keen to show that Jesus fulfils Old Testament prophecies, recalls Zechariah 9:9: there a king comes to Jerusalem in the manner that Jesus does now. Spreading “their cloaks on the road” (21:8) honours Jesus, as it did Jehu when he was proclaimed king. Only John 12:13 tells us that the “branches” were from palm trees.

The crowds outside the city shout “Hosanna” (21:9): here a cry of joyous acclamation; they hail him as heir to the throne of David, then shout part of Psalm 118:26. He deserves honour and praise not only from people, but also from angelic beings “in the highest heaven”.

Jesus’ reception in the city (21:11) is different: the crowds there see him as the prophet from Galilee, not understanding his mission. His entry does cause “turmoil” (21:10): the Greek word is also used to refer the effect of an earthquake!

Psalms 118:1-2,19-29

NRSV

Vv. 1-2 are a call to thanksgiving: God’s mercy, his “steadfast love”, is everlasting. May “Israel” (v. 2) (and) “those who fear the Lord” (v. 4) proclaim this! Vv. 5-13 say that, when the psalmist (possibly the king) was in distress, he “called on the LORD”, who heard him. With God on his side, there is nothing to fear; trusting in God is better than trusting in humans. Surrounded by his enemies, “in the name of the LORD I cut them off” (v. 11), with God’s help.

V. 15 recalls Exodus 15:2a, part of Israel’s classic victory song sung by Moses and the Israelites after crossing the Reed (Red) Sea. The “glad songs” are heard in the Temple, the community of the faithful.

The psalmist expects to live to old age (v. 17); he will proclaim God’s acts of power. He has suffered greatly at God’s hands, as a discipline, but God has preserved his life. He seeks entrance to the Temple (“gates of righteousness”, v. 19)

to give thanks; only the godly may enter therein (v. 20). V. 22, possibly based on an ancient proverb, may speak of the king’s rise to power or of his victory. On this day (v. 24) God has either saved his people or punished the ungodly – or both. This is a time for rejoicing. In v. 26, all proclaim he who was “rejected” (v. 22), but is now God’s chosen ruler. Note the progression in vv. 26-29: “festal procession”, “extol” (raise up), everlasting love.

