

Palm Sunday 29 March 2026

**David didn't ride a donkey**  
(drawn from Feasting on the Word)

Matthew 21 :1-11

**1. After Procession, before readings :**

I followed President Tinubu of Nigeria's state visit to the UK last week. King Charles received him with great pomp – there were mounted Life Guards, Welsh Guards in their red jackets and bearskin hats, military bands, the King and the President rode in a gilded horse-drawn carriage, and there was a HUGE banquet reception in Saint George's hall ... all very grand and very splendid!

In Roman times, things would have been a bit different in some respects but very similar in others. I asked Chat GPT to draw me a picture of a Roman governor – maybe Pontius Pilate – arriving triumphantly into Jerusalem (hand out pictures / put them on the paper board).

Let's think about Kings and triumphant processions : Can you give me some words or ideas that might be used to describe Kings and triumphant processions?

*(Discuss likely words conveying pomp and ceremony and power + write them on the board ...)*

Now let's think about the words on the board – did anyone mention “scooter”? Or the first century equivalent, “donkey”?

Hmmm – there is something going on there – let's listen to our first reading. Listen carefully, because I'm going to be asking you questions afterwards!

**2. Before Gospel reading**

So before the first reading we imagined what a powerful king arriving in triumph might look like – we thought about the usual trappings of military power and strength. But then what was that reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians all about?

What does Paul say that Jesus did? “He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave”  
...

And yet we say that Jesus is the King of the world – surely there should be more pomp? ... In Matthew's Gospel that we will hear in a moment, there are numerous references that underline that Jesus was the Messiah – sent by God to rescue His people. Look out for

- i) Where Jesus started His journey – The Old Testament prophet said the Messiah would come from the Mount of Olives;
- ii) The prophecy from Zechariah that Matthew says Jesus was fulfilling – what role did Jesus show that He was taking?
- iii) What the people shouted when they saw Jesus – who are they talking about and what does that funny word they use mean?

*(turn to flip-chart page with these questions)*

### **3. Reflection proper after the Gospel**

The title I have given to this reflection is “David didn’t ride a donkey”. Let me know at the end if you understand why I chose that title ...

The story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem takes place against a backdrop of intense messianic expectation: many longed for deliverance from Roman rule, possibly through the violent overthrow of Rome's occupation forces and its collaborators. This simmering tension would eventually erupt into open revolt, culminating in the destruction of the Temple by Roman forces in AD 70.

An imaginative reconstruction of the events of this spring morning in AD 30 suggests that two processions entered Jerusalem, one from the west in which the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entered the city on a war horse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He came to maintain law and order during the potentially volatile days of the Jewish festival of Passover which would see 200,000 pilgrims crowding into the holy city of maybe just 40,000 regular inhabitants. Pilate needed to flex his muscles, to demonstrate his grip on the city.

And there was a second procession from the east. This procession was not as grand. It was largely composed of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives. But it carried a threat far beyond its initial appearance...

Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God, the salvation of the people of Israel, while Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. This was the central conflict that would lead to Jesus' crucifixion.

Gentle Jesus faces off against this military power, deliberately reenacting the prophecies of Zechariah 9:9-10 which Saint Matthew quotes, in which the triumphant king's arrival is described as that of a peaceful monarch "humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey". But a humble king who will "cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem."

And the people respond – they welcome Him, crying "Hosanna to the Son of David." "Hosanna" is an Aramaic word that literally means "save us!"

Who is David? This is a reference to King David, the renowned warrior and military leader who expanded Israel's territory and established its strength. He was a "man of

valor," who defeated the giant Goliath with a sling. He led army campaigns against the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites. He was a real hero of the Jewish nation!

Small wonder that Matthew says that the whole city "was in turmoil" (v. 10), using the strong Greek word *eseisthe* (ἐσεισθη) that literally means "was shaken" or "trembled" (the word is the root of "seismic").

We have an explosive mix of Jesus planning and carrying out a messianic entry, the city crowded with 200'000 pilgrims, some crying to be saved from the Romans in the way that King David might have done, and those threatened by the rule of God's Messiah, including the Roman occupiers, ratcheting up their security measures.

The scene is set for a remake of David and Goliath! Jesus-David and Pilate-Goliath – "The Revenge of the Israelites!" "The Return of King David!" It'll be a box office smash hit!

But the story of David and Goliath is a story of unequal opponents fighting the same fight. And the plot twist is when the underdog comes out on top – we all love that.

This is different. Jesus and Pilate are each doing something completely different, on a completely different level. They are in absolute conflict ... but in different worlds.

And this explains the disappointment of all those who were hoping for the Roman occupiers to be overthrown on the earthly terms under which the Romans had occupied Jerusalem and Judea in the first place. The people who hoped that Jesus would be a new David – the people who cried 'Save us, Son of David!' – would be bitterly disappointed when Jesus-David didn't take on Goliath-Pilate in the worldly manner they expected. Jesus' kingship is disappointingly "otherworldly": gentle, humble, marked by mercy, acts of generosity and compassion.

### **OK - So what?**

Two things is what:

1. First takeaway: Jesus' entry, which we often celebrate with a donkey, with a procession ... was not just an Escalade parade or a first of August parade or a 14<sup>th</sup> of July parade. It was – and remains – deeply revolutionary, deeply counter-cultural. By deliberately fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy, Jesus was telling the people that He was the Messiah, He was the King of the world – not Pontius Pilate, not the temple authorities.

But He rode a donkey, and was not David II, He was not a warrior king.

Yet despite not being a warrior, despite being the gentle, humble Jesus who rode on His donkey to meet a Roman General on his war horse, the Jesus who enters Jerusalem was and continues to be a challenge to this world's powers

and principalities. And He is not merely a spiritual challenge but a political challenge as well.

Put simply, Jesus did not come "in triumph," was not crucified and raised, and communities of believers in him did not emerge, **in order to leave the ways of the world as they were.**

He changed everything. No matter what you believe, and no matter how weak or strong your faith, no one can deny that what Jesus did that week **changed the world.** Nothing was the same afterwards. Jesus' challenge changed the world then, and it continues to change the world now.

Jesus' crucifixion, an execution intended by Rome to extinguish a perceived threat, instead became the catalyst for a movement that refused to die and which continues, in a completely different context, 2000 years later. What looked like defeat to the earthly powers was in fact God's decisive act of love, radically redefining power not as domination but as self-giving sacrifice. The cross on which the Son of God died transformed shame into hope and suffering into a place of redemption. It gave birth to a new dignity accorded to the marginalised, a call to forgiveness and costly love, and a vision of human life shaped not by force, but by compassion. Jesus' challenged the system then and He continues to challenge the way we live today.

2. Second takeaway: OK, so Jesus changed the world ... and yet, it is also true that He suffered and died. Jesus did not satisfy the desires of those who wanted a new David to defeat the Roman Goliath. His salvation of the world did not include answering this fervent prayer.

Let's think for a moment about ourselves and any difficulties we are facing: what do we want? Like the people in Jerusalem, we probably all want to be saved from something. We want a rescuer, maybe the hulking chap on the white horse in my ChatGPT picture, to come in and save us (and maybe chop up the baddies while he's doing so!). We shout Hosanna! Save us! Save my job! Pay the mortgage! Beat up the bullies, do my exams for me, make my sick friend better! Hosanna! Stop the bombing of civilians! Hosanna!

But Jesus, the Messiah, didn't come on a white warhorse with His columns of well-trained soldiers... no, he came on a donkey. And the donkey came with her foal. And then He was crucified.

So when Jesus is nailed to the cross on Good Friday, our fervent prayers that God will find an easy way out for Jesus (and for us) will not have been answered in the way we prescribed. Jesus will have suffered physically and He will have despaired emotionally – and we wonder what that means for us...

What it doesn't mean is that God doesn't care, or that He isn't present with us, or that His triumph is not complete. It means that God's plan, God's answers to our prayers has been done in some incomprehensible way, in a different way that we don't understand.

Like our prayers for "Good-Friday-lite", when our fervent prayers for our own daily lives are not answered in the way we prescribe, and we lose our job, or the bad guy gets a promotion, or the bully is not caught and punished, or our sick friend does not get better, the bombing continues - that does not mean that God doesn't care, or that He isn't present with us, or that His triumph is not complete – it means that God is acting in some way we don't understand.

We can't expect Jesus to answer our shopping list of prayers in the exact way that the cool Roman on his white war horse might do. Jesus won't necessarily save our job, pay the mortgage, beat up the bullies, do our exams for us, make our friend better! But that doesn't mean that He is ignoring us – it just means that He doesn't go about things quite the way we do (luckily).

And this leads us to an understanding of hope. Christian hope. Our hope is not that bad things won't happen. It isn't that we will be saved the way we want to be saved. No, it is the belief that when it looks like everything has gone wrong (according to the way we see things), God is still at work for good and that somehow, in some incomprehensible way, His Kingdom is still breaking in and will continue to break in, evil will be definitively defeated, and life will be restored to all. Hope allows us to hold on, even when we don't understand God's ways.

Next Friday – on Good Friday – we will have an opportunity to try this hope out. The Temple authorities thought that the crucifixion of Jesus was the end of an embarrassing chapter. The Roman authorities thought that they'd got away with another Passover season without a riot. The disciples first thought that everything they'd dreamt of had been shattered. But through our hope we know that even though it didn't look good, there was and is something else going on. The King on a donkey who took on a Governor on a white warhorse had a different way to somehow, in some incomprehensible way, defeat death and sin and give us all a way back to God.

The topsy-turvy triumphal arrival in Jerusalem of Jesus on a donkey underlines that God's plan is something we can't see and don't understand. It says that sometimes we don't get what we wanted. We want King David, but Jesus isn't David ... Nevertheless, through the confusion and the impression of defeat and loss we can see Easter, and we can see the world-changing effects of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. And this gives us hope.

Amen

