

## WHO IS THIS?

Isaiah 50. 4-9a

Philippians 2. 5-11

Matthew 21. 1-11 (Palm Gospel)

Matthew 27. 11-54 (Passion Reading)

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

‘Who is this?’ Few questions are more important than this one; and as St Matthew reports, the ‘whole city’ of Jerusalem was in turmoil, asking this question on the first Palm Sunday. Yet the answer to that question is even more important. The Holy Spirit inspires Matthew to write (quoting the crowds), ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee’. But just who is this Jesus?

Matthew provides a variety of answers to this question throughout his gospel. Jesus, he tells us already in its first verse, is ‘the son of David, the son of Abraham’. He is, in other words, a true son of Israel.

Who is this Jesus? When the angel of the Lord tells Joseph that his fiancée is carrying a son, he tells him to name him ‘Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins’. So Matthew almost immediately tells us that Jesus is a Saviour.

Who is this Jesus? Matthew 4. 23 reports that Jesus ‘went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people’. Jesus, in other words, is a teacher, preacher and healer.

Who is this Jesus? Theologian John Timmer once suggested that ‘Matthew presents Jesus first and foremost as the teacher of the Church’. Timmer noted that Matthew does this by structuring his entire gospel around five major teachings of Jesus.

In Matthew 16, Jesus actually asks who people think he is. When his disciples report that people offer all sorts of wrong answers, Jesus turns to them and asks them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God’, Peter (always quick with a reply) answers. Who, then, is this Jesus? He is the Messiah.

The question of Jesus’s identity comes up again in this Sunday’s Palm Gospel with the question, ‘Who is this?’

Matthew’s account of the first Palm Sunday offers answers to that question. At the beginning of our text, we are told that Jesus arrives with his disciples at Bethphage, near the Mount of Olives. Suddenly, we remember that Jewish expectations of the Messiah were strongly linked to that Mount.<sup>1</sup> So who is this Jesus? Matthew again at least hints that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel.

Who is this Jesus? He is God’s Son, to whom the world’s donkeys belong. So from that Mount of Olives Jesus can send disciples to arrange for two of those donkeys that he ‘needs’ for his trip into Jerusalem.

Who is this Jesus? He is the fulfilment of prophecy. After all, Matthew notes that Jesus’s ride into Jerusalem on a donkey fulfils Zechariah’s prophecy (9. 9): ‘your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt . . .’ Jesus is the One to whom the prophets point.

Some who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover join the parade as Jesus descends from the Mount of Olives. Though Jesus rides a donkey rather than a war-horse, the crowd still senses the royal symbolism of his ride. So that crowd carpets his path with both their cloaks and the branches that they have cut from the trees.

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish expectation centred upon the Mount of Olives as a place for political deliverance. According to this expectation, a triumphant Messiah figure would appear on the Mount, miraculously deliver Jerusalem from the Gentile armies that surrounded it and cleanse the Temple from all pagan influence. This event, in the Jewish view, would herald the arrival of the ‘kingdom of God’.

As Jesus nears Jerusalem, the pilgrims who engulf him start chanting phrases they borrow from Psalm 118. Who is this Jesus? The crowds answer, ‘the Son of David’, reminding us that Jesus is actually the king of the Jerusalem that he now enters. One theologian has suggested that ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ essentially means, ‘God save the King!’

As we have seen, the crowds that surround Jesus understand that he is (at least) a ‘prophet from Nazareth in Galilee’. So the first Palm Sunday’s crowd understands that Jesus is more than just a miracle-worker, a successful doctor or a teacher who knows the Bible backward and forward. Who is this Jesus? He is a speaker of God’s truth. Yet during the week to come, these same crowds will learn that Jesus is more than just a prophet...or even a king.

In the meantime, however, Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem causes a huge commotion. Our text says that all of Jerusalem was ‘in turmoil’; yet this word is too mild. A more appropriate translation would be ‘shaken’, as in ‘shaken by the force produced by an earthquake’.

We believers who have the benefit of hindsight know the earth-shaking importance of what happens on the first Palm Sunday. We also know that this is only the first of the seismic shocks that will rumble through Jerusalem during the coming week. Just as Jesus’s birth ‘shook’ King Herod and all of Jerusalem, so his death and resurrection will shake Jerusalem and far beyond.

Rome held the Jews fully as captive as the Egyptians ever did. So the people who shouted, ‘God save the King!’ to Jesus were looking for a royal liberator. In the coming week, Jesus will, in fact, prove to be the Jews’ liberator.

However, he won't be the kind of deliverer that some are looking for. Perhaps partly as a result of that, in less than a week shouts of 'Hosanna to the Son of David' will be drowned out by another shout: 'Let him be crucified'.<sup>2</sup> Cries of 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' will be covered by 'His blood be on us and our children'.<sup>3</sup>

The shouts on Good Friday were loudest precisely because so few people understood the answer to this question, 'Who is this Jesus?' And that is why this question is so pivotal for us as well. After all, our answer to this question determines whether Jesus disappoints, comforts, frustrates or encourages us.

This Jesus came, just as the angel of the Lord told Joseph right before Jesus was born, to 'save his people from their sins'. So who is this Jesus? He is the One who accepted in body and soul God's full fury with the sins of the whole human race. Who is this Jesus? He is the One who with his own precious blood bought us, body and soul, to be his very own.

Who is this Jesus? He is the One whom the Father sent to completely free and make us right with God. Who is this Jesus? He is the One who has freed his followers from sin and the control of the devil. Who is this Jesus? He is the One who has delivered us from the anguish and torment of hell itself.

Of course, this Jesus is far, far more. On this Palm Sunday, however, we especially want to remember that 'this Jesus' is our Saviour. He is the One who came to live, die and rise again from the dead for our sins. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mt 27. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mt 27. 25.