

Who is this Jesus?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Would you turn with me to Matthew, chapter 21. If you've been attending Trinity this spring, you know that we just finished a teaching series in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapters 5 through 7.

So now, as we come to Palm Sunday and as we look ahead to Good Friday and to Easter, we're going to stay right here in Matthew's Gospel. Today, we'll consider Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, what we call the triumphal entry.

And then on Good Friday, we'll look at Matthew's passion narratives. And then on Easter, we'll consider Matthew, chapter 28, Jesus' resurrection. So let's go to Matthew, chapter 21 together. That's page 775 in the Pew Bible.

I'm going to read verses 1 through 17, but first, let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we do ask as we come now again to the gospel according to Matthew that you would be working by your Spirit to help us to understand these things with our minds.

But more importantly, to sense these things on our hearts, to be gripped and moved by them. Lord, we know that that is possible only by your Spirit because our minds and our hearts are so distracted and so fickle in so many ways.

[1 : 2 9] So, God, help us as we come to your Word to really hear and understand and to live what it is your Spirit is saying to us. Would we see Christ exalted as King, the one who lives that death may die.

Pray this in His name. Amen. All right, let me read for us Matthew 21, 1 through 17. Now, when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her.

Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, The Lord needs them, and He will send them at once. This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, Say to the daughter of Zion, Behold, your King is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, Who is this?

[3 : 0 1] And the crowd said, This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee. And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

And He said to them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers. And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple, Hosanna to the Son of David, they were indignant. And they said to Him, Do you hear what these are saying?

And Jesus said to them, Yes. Have you never read? Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies, you have prepared praise? And leaving them, He went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

So you're out to dinner at a restaurant, enjoying a nice quiet evening with a friend or your spouse maybe, and suddenly outside, four identical black escalades pull up, and you see them through the window.

[4 : 14] And out get a bunch of people sort of all identically dressed, and they usher someone, you don't know who, into the back of the restaurant to the special dining area. And there's a buzz in the restaurant, and everyone's asking, Who is this?

I wonder if you've ever been somewhere where you see a motorcade go by, or you see sort of a crowd, and you wonder, Who is this? It must be someone important, right? Well, that is the question everyone is asking as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Who is this? And you know, that is still the most relevant question today. Who is this Jesus?

And that question has the power to determine the course of your life. Now, perhaps you've been a Christian for a long time, so maybe for you, that question is pretty settled.

But are you willing to ask it again, to get a fresh view of Jesus, to learn a bit more about who He is, and what it means to be called by His name?

[5 : 23] That's what this Sunday, what we call Palm Sunday, invites us to do. Or maybe you're not too sure about Christianity. You're exploring religion, not quite sure where you land spiritually.

Well, this question is one that you should not, that you cannot avoid. Who is this Jesus? But why?

Why is this the question everyone must ask? Well, Matthew's account of what we call the triumphal entry shows us. First, consider the magnitude of Jesus' claim in this passage, the magnitude of His claim.

You know, if you've got a flyer in the mail, that sort of said, hey, you know, the convenience store down the road is giving free coffee. You're going to be like, oh, that's cool, free coffee, great. You know, but if you've got a letter in the mail that was on sort of official letterhead, saying that you've inherited some significant sum, right, you probably wouldn't just throw it in the trash.

You'd probably think, that's something to pause and consider. What is Jesus doing when He tells His disciples to go into the village ahead of them and bring the donkey and her young colt?

[6 : 40] They're on their way up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Is Jesus tired, right? Does He need a ride? Well, no, right?

Jesus walked everywhere with His disciples. Presumably, He's in pretty good shape to make the walk, right? They spent three years walking around Palestine. I think He can handle it. Maybe it was customary for pilgrims to Jerusalem to ride into town.

Well, actually, some sources from the first century would suggest exactly the opposite, that the expectation, the custom, was for pilgrims to walk into Jerusalem.

So it's all the more surprising what Jesus does here. What is it? What is Jesus doing? What is it? Well, Jesus is making a very deliberate claim.

It's deliberate and it's massive. He's claiming here, quite intentionally, to be the king. To be the king of Israel and thereby to be the king of the whole world.

[7 : 48] Now, how do we see that? Well, Matthew shows us in verses 4 through 5. Jesus here, in doing this act, is intentionally picking up the symbolism of a very ancient prophecy.

The prophet Zechariah in the sixth century spoke of a future king who would ride into Zion, into Jerusalem, on a young donkey. And for first century Jews whose minds and imaginations were steeped in Scripture, whose hearts were fueled with hope and with longing for God to send this long-awaited king, for them, Jesus' action was unmistakable.

It would be like someone walking into a courtroom kind of wearing a long robe, right? Or someone walking into a hospital wearing a white coat, right? Well, what would they be saying? Will they be saying, well, look, I'm the judge.

I'm the doctor. Here, the symbolic action was immediately recognizable. Jesus was saying, I'm the king. Jesus was claiming to possess rightful authority over God's people and over God's creation because the Messiah was supposed to come.

He was expected to come and to liberate God's people and to rule over the nations. So that means by making this messianic claim, Jesus wasn't just saying, you know, if you're looking for a spiritual guide, I'm a pretty good option.

[9 : 15] I can give you my card. No, He's making just a stunning claim to complete sovereignty, so complete that He has the audacity to enter into the temple courts and say exactly what should and shouldn't be happening there.

And again, this act of what we call cleansing the temple, that too is a symbolic act, just charged with meaning. The Old Testament looked forward to the day when God would return to Zion and to the temple and enact the great purification of God's people.

You know, again, when someone enters a courtroom wearing a robe, you know who they're claiming to be, but when they sit down on the bench and bang the gavel and call the court to order, right, that is an unmistakable claim to authority.

So it is here with Jesus. So as we consider the magnitude of His claim then, you know, we must not approach Jesus as sometimes we are tempted to approach Him.

That is, as someone who claimed to be merely a good spiritual teacher. And you know, as Christians, we're just as guilty of this as anyone else. You know, do we recognize the complete claim that Jesus is making here?

[10 : 31] Not just to be our spiritual guide or a helpful teacher, but to be the utter king of our lives and over every part of creation. Now, a lot of people in history have had delusions of grandeur, haven't they?

Thought themselves to be great. You know, was Jesus simply one of them? Was Jesus just simply one of these folks in history who've had delusions of grandeur?

I remember when I was studying in Oxford many years ago and they were sort of introducing us to the city. They said, you know, if you're walking around downtown and you find someone shabbily dressed, you know, maybe their hair is a little messy and they're sort of talking to themselves, just ignore them.

They're professors. They'll be fine. You know? But if you see someone who's kind of shabbily dressed and their hair is a little messy and they're talking to themselves and they ask you for money, well, they might be homeless. So make sure you treat them with dignity and respect and here's some ways you can care for them.

You know? So it's... You know, but imagine you were walking downtown this afternoon and you met someone who introduced themselves as the President of the United States. You probably wouldn't give that claim much thought, would you?

[11 : 44] Why is Jesus' claim different? Well, when we consider the teaching of Jesus and when we consider the life of Jesus, we realize that this claim of His to be king is not the claim of someone who's lost their grip on reality.

You know, consider His teaching. Was there anyone who taught with such clarity and such profundity and such authority as Jesus?

Again and again in the historical accounts that we read, the crowds were amazed at this authority. Read the teaching of Jesus for yourself. Do they strike you as words spoken by a charlatan or by a man with delusions of grandeur?

Or do they come to you like a key, like a key that unlocks a door you didn't even know remained closed in your heart? When you consider the words that He speaks, do they open up for you a field of imagination of a life lived that looks more alive than anything you've considered before?

Do you feel the breeze of a new world coming into the windows of your heart? And consider not just His words, consider His actions.

[13 : 06] Who else acted with such compassion and such courage? I mean, look at our passage right here. In the temple, Jesus acts with the utmost courage and justice, removing the money changers from the temple.

And then in the very next moment, He's welcoming the weak and the wounded, and He's healing them. His character and His integrity were never in question.

So these are not the words or the works of a delusional man. And so when He rides into Jerusalem, the magnitude of His claim just demands that we ask, who is this?

Who is this who claims to be our King? But it's not just the magnitude of His claim that we see here. We also see the character of His kingdom.

The second reason we have to ask, who is this Jesus, is because of the character of His kingdom. Because you see, Jesus doesn't just claim to be the King in these verses. He also shows us what sort of King He is.

[14 : 08] As humans, we're perhaps rightly suspicious of claims to authority. After all, is it not our experience that human authority is so often abused?

Authority in our broken world is used to build up the powerful at the expense of the powerless. Right? Right? How rarely do we see authority used in the way that God intended it?

Consider the words of David in 2 Samuel chapter 23. We read there, That's how God intended authority to function, as a gift that causes flourishing, like the dawn breaking the darkness of night, like the sun shining and giving warmth and hope, like the rain causing the earth to spring forth with life and growth.

This is God's vision of authority used rightly. And when we turn to Jesus, what sort of King do we see? One who rules for His own gain?

One who advances His own prestige and honor? One who tramples the powerless so that His power might extend? No. No. Jesus doesn't enter Jerusalem at the head of an army.

[15 : 44] He rides on a donkey. And on a young donkey at that. A donkey so young, as Matthew points out, that the mother of this foal was brought along too, presumably to keep the younger animal calm amidst the crowds.

Now, it wasn't completely uncommon for kings to ride donkeys in the ancient world. That might seem strange to us. You know, you never see sort of a famous rapper driving a Nissan Sentra, right?

I've driven two Nissan Sentras in my lifetime, actually. They're not bad. But, you know, in the ancient world, even though that might seem strange to us, kings did ride donkeys, actually. Both David and Solomon, Israel's greatest kings, are depicted at moments in their life riding donkeys in the Old Testament.

However, when were they ridden? They were ridden in times of peace. Jesus comes to Jerusalem not to raise an army, not to take up the sword and fight the Romans, not to do what so many wanted the Messiah to do.

He came to bring peace. And He would do so not through violence, but through gentleness, through humility.

[17 : 00] Behold, your king is coming to you, Zachariah said, That word humble is the same word translated as meek or gentle in other places in Matthew, like in the Beatitudes of Matthew chapter 5, blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

So what we have here then, here is one who claims all authority, and yet he comes with that full authority in gentleness. So gentle, so trustworthy, that he can lead a young, frightened cult through a surging crowd.

Of course, it's hard for us to imagine those two attributes in one, isn't it? Authority and humility, authority and gentleness. It's hard for us to bring them together in our minds.

But again, look at Jesus' immediate action in the temple when He overturns the tables of the money changers. You know, it's important to see here that He's not acting sort of in a rage of anger.

He doesn't sort of lose control in the temple courts. Jesus is acting in complete control, which is what gentleness or meekness means, actually.

[18 : 18] It's power under control. Think of a professional golfer. You know, a professional golfer can smash a ball hundreds of yards if they need to.

But when they're on the putting green, just a few feet from the hole, they can act with the utmost control. All of their power, all of their skill is exercised to this delicate end of sinking the putt.

And that's what we see of Jesus in the temple. Now, a bit of historical context. You know, this practice of putting money changers and animal stalls inside the temple courts, some historians think that that was a relatively new innovation in Jerusalem.

Of course, when people arrived in Jerusalem for a festival like Passover here, they had to change their currency from wherever they had traveled from, and they needed to buy the appropriate sacrifice once they had arrived in the city.

After all, you can't make a long pilgrimage carrying your lamb or your bird with you the whole way, right? So these stalls were a bit of a necessity for the pilgrims who arrived.

[19 : 26] And that's not what Jesus has a problem with. It's not the stalls per se. It's their location. The ruling council in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin, had something recently permitted these stalls to be set up inside the temple courts.

Now, remember that the temple complex in Jerusalem was just a massive structure. At the center of it was what we might call the temple proper, sort of the building where only the priests could go, but then surrounding the temple proper were various series of courts.

And some of those courts nearest to the temple were reserved only for Jews, but as you went further out, the outer courts were more and more open to more groups of people. And that whole structure in the first century was sometimes just referred to as the temple, the whole thing.

But it was in these outer courts that the Jerusalem authorities had permitted these market stalls to be set up. Now, imagine. Imagine you've traveled to Jerusalem many, many miles to worship the one true God of Israel.

And perhaps you're not even a Jew, or perhaps you are, and you can't go into one of those more inner courts. And there you are in the outer courts to worship, to obey God's call, to come and give Him praise, to bring your sacrifice and your offering to the priests.

[20 : 50] It's the highlight of your year. You're there to pray. You're there to commune with God. And instead of worship and reverence, you hear heckling over exchange rates and bartering over the price of a pigeon.

I mean, how do you feel when you've planned for months and months and bought your concert ticket, right? And you've been looking forward to it for so long, and finally the day comes, and you go to the venue, and you take your seat, and the symphony comes out to play, and they tune up, and they begin, and then someone's cell phone starts ringing in the back of the audience.

And then worse than that, they pick it up. Hey, I'm busy right now. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I miss you too. That show's great. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thanks for asking. Okay, I'll call you later.

No, no, no, no, no, no. Dinner? Sure, yeah, bye. It's terrible, right? You should throw your program at them. How much worse in Jesus' day, how much worse that the worship of the living God in the temple was treated with such little regard by the very leaders who were supposed to care for it, that they would allow the barking and the bustle of a bazaar inside the very place where the focus was meant to be prayer and communion with God?

So you see, Jesus' action here is in direct confrontation with the temple authorities. He's come as the king. He's come to claim his rightful authority over God's people and over the temple, and with perfect precision, exercising his power with complete control for the sake of God's people and for the honor of God's name, he stages a demonstration.

[22 : 40] He overturns the tables and denounces the dishonor of God's name. So what's the point?

Well, the point is the sort of king that Jesus is. You know, here is a king, here is a king who could have marshaled an army and made a throne for himself.

Look at how excited the crowds are outside the city gates. Don't you think he could have whipped them up into a fury and started a political revolution? They were ready to go. But what does he do?

He goes to the outer courts of the temple and on behalf of the Gentiles and outsiders and those who could only worship God in that farthest most place, there he exercises his authority.

There he puts himself at risk. There Jesus puts it all on the line for the glory of God and for the least of these. For those with no right to go any further, that's where the king stands.

[23 : 51] This is the character of his kingdom. The king comes not to be served, but to serve, to pour out his authority on behalf of the blind and the lame and the hurting and the lost.

He's come to receive the praise, not of the powerful and the privileged, but of the lowly children running through the streets. This is the sort of king he is.

But you know, Palm Sunday was just the beginning. The peace this king had come to achieve as he rode into Jerusalem, you know, it was about much more than just cleaning up the noise pollution in the outer courts of the temple.

Jesus had actually come to fulfill what the temple was all about. This king, with all rightful authority, by week's end, wouldn't just put himself at risk on behalf of outsiders.

He would willingly put himself in the place of judgment for the sake of sinners. You know, it's a wonder of wonders that a king would exercise his authority to stand up for the outcast as they sought to pray.

[25 : 04] But there are no words to describe the wonder of what Jesus would do as this week drew to its climax. The rightful king would allow himself to be arrested and to be tried and to be sentenced.

He would marshal all of his authority not to defeat his enemies, but to lay down his life for them on the cross.

Consider the character of this king. You know, as the mob came to arrest him a mere four days later, his disciples wanted to defend him. They wanted to take up swords and fight. And Jesus would say to them in Matthew's gospel, don't you think that I can appeal to my father?

Don't you think that I can't appeal to my father and he would at once send me more than 12 legions of angels? This king had the authority to command the whole host of heaven.

And yet he chooses instead to become the atoning sacrifice for sin. And when on the third day he is resurrected in power, even then what does this king say?

[26 : 15] He tells his followers, go into all the world and proclaim the good news that forgiveness of sins is now granted, free of charge, to everyone who repents and believes.

who is this Jesus? He claims to be the true king and his character is like no other.

This is a king who brings the full weight of his authority to rescue even his enemies. And if this is who Jesus is, the question now becomes, who will we be?

Who will we be in light of this Jesus? We've seen the magnitude of his claim, the character of his kingdom. Now what is his call on us? What is the invitation of this king?

Well, consider first the contrast here between the authorities and the children in verse 15. On the one hand, the chief priests and the scribes are what? Indignant, Matthew says.

[27 : 24] How dare Jesus bring their authority into question? Not just overturning the tables of the money changers, but performing mighty works right there in the temple.

They had been exposed. Their authority was being called to account. How often we can be like them. Jesus makes a claim of lordship over our lives.

He demands to be our king. He comes with the authority to turn over the tables of our life and remake us from the inside out. You know, it's very easy to look down on the chief priests and scribes, isn't it?

How can they be so hard-hearted, we think? But do we submit to the rightful authority of Jesus? Do we acknowledge him as our king when he comes to your life and my life and says, come like the children of verse 15, who unlike the chief priests and scribes are not indignant, they're jubilant.

They sing, Hosanna to the son of David. Now, Hosanna is a Hebrew word that originally meant come save, come rescue. But, you know, over years it simply became an expression of praise, right?

[28 : 52] The children are praising Jesus as the rightful king. What prevents you from receiving Jesus as your rightful king?

Perhaps you're just not yet convinced that these claims are true. Well, friends, if that's you, explore them. Figure out whether these claims hold weight. Read the Gospels for yourself.

Take a book from the bookstall next week and see whether these things might be true. But perhaps what prevents you is a bit more subtle than that. What will people say if I become a Christian?

You know, the chief priests look down their noses at the children. And perhaps you're afraid that the people you care about might look down their noses at you. But look at how Jesus comes to the defense of these children.

He quotes Psalm 8, Haven't you read that out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise? Remember the character of this king.

[30 : 03] Though some may reject you and some may despise you, he never will. He will be your defense at all times. He will not let you be put to shame. So this is the first way we have to ask this question.

Who will we be? Will we reject Jesus' claim with indignation? Or will we embrace it with joy? But there's another way we have to ask this question.

Who will we be? And this applies more directly to those of us who have accepted Jesus' authority, to those of us who are Christians. Consider the crowds in verse 8. You know, now the crowds get, the crowds get a lot right in this passage, don't they?

They spread their cloaks on the road. They cut branches and put them along the path as well. And both of those actions were ways of heralding someone as a king in the first century. And they shout out Hosanna to the son of David.

In their actions and in their words, they're ready to receive Jesus as king and that's a good thing. And then notice what happens next. They actually capture the attention of the whole city. Heads start to turn. People start to notice.

[31 : 10] That's a good thing too. These crowds are getting a lot right. They celebrate Jesus as king gladly. But here's the challenge for us.

Are we willing to receive Jesus not just as king but as the sort of king he is? Matthew doesn't say, but I wonder how many on the road that day were hoping for a certain kind of king.

A king who would fight fire with fire, who would finally bring revenge on their enemies, who would vindicate who they thought were the good guys and shame who they thought were the bad guys.

But that's not the sort of king Jesus proved himself to be. And the question is, are we willing to be followers of this sort of king?

A king who exercises authority on behalf of the powerless and weak. A king who doesn't fight fire with fire but who brings peace even when it's costly to himself in the extreme.

[32 : 24] A king who's willing to sacrifice so that others might flourish. A king who's willing to be courageous for those in the outer courts, the poor and the lame and the blind and the children. This is the king that we follow. Is this what we are known for?

Is this how we define real authority and real leadership and real success? When people observe our church or our homes, our impact in the workplace or in the community, when people see these things, can they say that our presence is like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth?

Is that what authority looks like in our midst? As each of us in our own spheres exercise the authority that God gives us, does it look like the kind of authority that brings flourishing and hope?

And that's why we too must constantly ask ourselves, who is this Jesus? We have to return to the crowds on Palm Sunday and see the king of the universe humble and mounted on a donkey.

That is real greatness. That is real authority. Not exalting himself, but lowering himself. Caring, even for the young foal that he rides as the mother leads the way.

[33 : 56] Brothers and sisters, look again at Jesus. And this week, as we sort of take up our proverbial cloaks and throw them in the road, may we realize that Jesus hands us a towel in return and calls us to wrap it around our waist and says, as I have served you, so you too must serve one another.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, on this Palm Sunday, we do join our voices with those in the crowd and say, praise, praise to you, the Son of David.

Lord, and we also admit that our praise, like theirs, falls short. Lord, our hearts are embattled with so many expectations and desires and longings and how grateful we are that you see them all in your kindness and your humility and in your gentleness.

Lord, you see our pride and you see our weariness. You see our strength and you see our weakness. You see our joys and you see our griefs. And how greatly we celebrate that you have come, yes, to even be our King in love and in grace.

So fill us with your love and grace this week that our minds would be captured and our hearts would be captured by the sort of King that you are and show us by your Spirit how we might live that out with your help in the week to come.

[35 : 35] We pray this in your mighty name. Amen. Amen.