

“Who is he?”

Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams notes, “Two thousand years after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, another visitor came to the city, Germany’s last Kaiser, Wilhelm II. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through. After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate. The sign read, ‘A better man than Wilhelm came through this city’s gate. He rode on a donkey.’”

Dr. Adams asks, “What made Jesus a better man, do you think? What was it about him that compelled the people to spread their cloaks and wave their branches in the air?” “What is it about him that still inspires millions of people to give their lives to him and even for him?” Rev. Adams suggests, “Nowhere has the paradoxical beauty of the mind of Christ been more eloquently expressed than by Paul in his Letter to the Philippians: *‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.’*”

After quoting the Apostle Paul, Adams asks the question again, “What made him a better man?” Answering her own question, Adams explains, “It was his beautiful mind, which was nothing less than the very Mind of God.

- * His beautiful mind put him on the back of that donkey.
- * His beautiful mind gave him the courage to speak the message of salvation no matter what it cost.
- * His beautiful mind opened his eyes so that he could see the people who were being put down or shut out by unjust practices and selfish ambitions on the part of others.
- * His beautiful mind led him to overturn the tables of the money changers in the temple, led him to cure the blind and the lame.
- * His beautiful mind brought him to his knees before the disciples so that he could wash their feet on the night of his betrayal.
- * His mind led him to the cross where he poured out his life.” (Day1.org. “A Beautiful Mind” by Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams)

Matthew explains what Jesus intended his entrance into Jerusalem to mean to the people in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday by quoting the prophecy of Zechariah, saying,

*“Tell the city of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you!
He is humble and rides on a donkey
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

From Matthew’s quote of Zechariah, it seems Jesus wanted everyone to understand his entrance into Jerusalem claimed he came as the **“king”** Zechariah prophesized – God’s promised Messiah! However, toward the conclusion of today’s Scripture, we are told, **“Who is he?” the people asked.**” If the crowds knew the message Jesus was sending them, then why were they asking, **“Who is he?”**

Those in the crowd demonstrated they understood the meaning of Jesus’ symbolism when he rode in on a donkey. Matthew’s description reports the gathering, like our Call To Worship, quoting another famous Scripture from Psalm 118, writing, **“A large crowd of people spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds walking in front of Jesus and those walking behind began to shout, ‘Praise to David’s Son! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise be to God!’”**

Because the people responded with those words, it is very clear they knew the person riding the donkey was coming as the King – the descendant of David, coming as God’s representative – **“in the name of the Lord!”** What they did not know was the name of the one on the donkey. So, they understood the claim being made by the donkey rider but they needed to identify his personal identity because his claim could only be honestly evaluated, after they knew him, his words, and his actions – the evidence of his claim. That is why Matthew wrote, **“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into an uproar. ‘Who is he?’ the people asked.”** Some in the crowd had a rudimentary knowledge about Jesus and they said, **“This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”**

Responding to those words of the people, Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad writes, “Who is this? That was the question then and still is. As this week passes, we’ll hear once again what happened to the man on the donkey. We know his name is Jesus. We probably know something about him even if we haven’t been to church in a while.” Lundblad explains, “Centuries of tradition have taught us that Jesus died for our sins, a payment we could never make on our own. At times it seems that God had it all planned out, and Jesus had no choice but to follow the script: ‘Send some disciples to Bethphage. Tell them to untie a donkey and a colt. Recite the ancient prophecy. Ride into Jerusalem ...’”

Lundblad asks, “Was it all so neatly scripted?” She notes, “Some have dared to raise questions, to wonder aloud about such inevitability. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson speaks for others when she questions the interpretation of Jesus’ death as ‘required by God in repayment for sin.’ She says, ‘Such a view is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent, sadistic father ...’”. Dr. Johnson “understands the story in a different way: ‘Who is this? Some of the old answers may no longer hold for you or for me. That doesn’t mean we’ve stopped believing; rather, it means that some of our certitudes, our very doctrines, have pinned Jesus down too securely.” Johnson continues, “We need to look again and see what we didn’t see before, daring to be surprised by the man on the donkey.” Johnson concludes, “Our brother Dietrich Bonhoeffer met a God he had never known while he was confined in Hitler’s prison.” “‘God allows Himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross,’ Bonhoeffer said, ‘and that is the way, the only way, in which God can be with us and help us ... Only a suffering God can help.’” (Day1.org “Who is he?” by Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad)

Part of the evidence for Jesus’ claim of being the Promised One – the Messiah – the King is his reason for coming to Jerusalem. Jesus had intentionally headed to Jerusalem to fulfill his purpose for his First Coming. He came to fulfill God’s Promises of our deliverance from the powers of evil and death – to demonstrate God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial **“Agape”** Love for us, even though human beings did not and we do not deserve it. Jesus accomplished this demonstration of God’s Love through his undeserved death – murder – execution on a cross. Jesus was obedient to God’s Purpose for his life and he is also the ultimate example of how to respond to God’s Love for us.

Today and through the next seven days, what is the answer you will give to the question **“Who is he?”** Is he the one to whom you are committed? Is the type of loving and welcoming life he lived the example you will to follow? Because Jesus Christ allowed God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us to be manifested through his undeserved suffering and death, will you put your trust in God’s Faithfulness and Love? Let your life acclaim Jesus Christ as the Son of God – the Suffering Servant of God, who is God’s Love made manifest for you and all people! Amen.