

The Second Most Important Person in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday

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Luke 19:28-40 and Luke 23:13-25, 44-47

Everyone knows who the most important person in Jerusalem was on Palm Sunday, right? Jesus, of course! After all, he had his own parade following him into the city! People were laying palms and the cloaks off their backs on the road before him like a red carpet. People were shouting and singing with such enthusiasm that it rattled the religious leaders, who pleaded with Jesus to pull the plug on the festivities.

But Jesus was not the only important person there that day. Some of the other candidates probably thought themselves to be the most important. Like Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, whose word was literally law. The Jewish King Herod might have liked to think himself the most important person in Jerusalem; but everyone knew that he was nothing more than a figurehead and a puppet for the Romans and not a legitimate king. Those religious leaders that had tried to shut down Jesus' parade probably considered themselves to be the most important. After all, they were supposed to be God's spokespersons.

But no matter what any one of this cast of characters believed about their own significance, none of them was more important than Jesus. No one among them was really even the *second* most important person in Jerusalem that day. As a matter of fact, the second most important person on the scene that day was not even a person. It was a donkey. Not just any donkey, though. Jesus had his mind set on a specific donkey.

Luke devotes more verses to explaining the process by which this donkey was obtained for Jesus to ride, than anything else about his triumphal entry into Jerusalem! What might be considered a minor detail in the events of that day unfolds with the sense of intentionality and inevitability of stopping at the Hertz counter of an airport upon arrival at your destination, certain that the specific vehicle you had reserved will be waiting and ready for you there.

So, what made this donkey so special that it was more important than rulers and religious leaders? It was the message that it sent to the crowds about the identity of its rider. The people of Jerusalem were used to parades for important people like kings and victorious generals. But the ones being honored by those parades were usually mounted on a majestic stallion or a warhorse. An animal that projected power and might. Jesus did exactly the opposite. He intentionally rode on the humblest of all mounts—a donkey. A donkey so young that it was not matured enough to have ever been ridden before.

Despite that unimposing image, the people who accompanied Jesus were crying out as they neared the city, "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and

glory in the highest heaven!” How did the crowds that day look at a man without any royal robes, no crown or scepter riding a common beast of burden and decide he must be a king?

This is how. They realized that what they were seeing was the fulfillment of this centuries old oracle by a prophet named Zechariah. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your *king* comes to you; Triumphant and glorious is he, Humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Throughout Jerusalem’s history they had seen their share of parades for kings and conquerors, celebrating political or military triumphs and victories. But the procession on this day was a hero’s welcome for a king whose strength was in his humility and whose campaign was for peace. The ancient oracle from Zechariah painted a picture of a king whose authority does not come from an empire, but directly from God. And whose goal is not conquest through war but the establishment of peace. That is why those in the parade that formed around Jesus as he entered Jerusalem were shouting, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

And that is why the second most important person in Jerusalem that day—after Jesus—was a donkey. Because without the donkey under him, and what it stood for and how it identified its rider, Jesus might not have been the most important person entering the gates of Jerusalem that day. At least, not the most important in the minds of the people that didn’t already know him.

But this donkey has an important lesson to teach *us* about Jesus, too. Which is that Jesus can turn even the most humble, inexperienced and underappreciated *creatures* into vehicles for bearing the truth about him into the world in which *we* live today. Including people like you and me. The people in this story who gave the most to honor Jesus were likely people who had the least to give.

Luke’s version of what we call Palm Sunday doesn’t even mention palms. Instead of saying that people laid palms in the road before Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, this Gospel says that people laid their cloaks on the ground before him. It is more likely than not that these were simple folks who did not possess armoires filled with extensive wardrobes. Probably, what they had was what they were wearing. When they removed their outer cloaks and spread them on the road it was more than a gesture of welcome. It was literally a demonstration of their willingness to give what little they had for Jesus.

The same goes for the owners of the donkey that Jesus rode to Jerusalem. A donkey is not a very glamorous animal, but this donkey might have been the only means of transportation for travel or for transporting goods to market for a poor family. So, it was no small demand that was being asked of them.

Every one of us has something – call it *your* donkey, if you will – something that Jesus can use to show the world that he is who he claims to be. It could be some talent or skill or knowledge

that you possess. It might be some time and energy that you have to give. Or perhaps it is a portion of your material possessions or your income. It might be your heart. Whatever it may be, is it easy or difficult for you to surrender it when Jesus calls? When that voice whispers in your ear that the Lord needs your donkey, how do you respond?

When the owners of the donkey asked Jesus' disciples why they were taking it, they said, "The Lord needs it." It was not uncommon in the laws of ancient civilizations to require a subject to surrender to a king or his emissaries whatever the king needed, as if he already owned it anyway. And isn't that true about everything that we possess? Whatever Jesus could possibly ask of us is already his anyhow! Nothing that we own, nothing about who we are, would be ours, if God had not provided it to us in the first place. Yet, Jesus doesn't take without asking first.

The Lord needs your donkey – your unique, one-of-a-kind contribution to helping the world know him a little better for who he truly is. However humble your offering may seem to you, to Jesus the parade just won't be complete without you.

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