

April 5, 2020 – Philippians 2:5-11 & Matthew 21:1-11

A couple weeks ago, the Missouri State Highway Patrol posted a message on Facebook. It was to inform the public that officers would only wear their Class C uniforms for the time being. You see, the state troopers have a couple styles of uniform.

The Class A is what they normally wear. It is very formal. Very professional. It has a tie and a wide brimmed hat. And it is what they generally wear when they're on duty. Unfortunately, it is also dry-clean only. Which means officers usually don't have it washed after every single shift. And that's a problem when you're on the front lines of a fight against a highly contagious disease.

The Class C uniform, however, can be washed and disinfected at home after every single shift. But the Class C uniform is also quite a bit less formal. It's actually a bit more military in its style. And the Highway Patrol wanted to make sure that the public was warned about this change in apparel and why it was occurring.

Because things like what we wear change how we are perceived. I've seen that first hand. People react differently to me when I'm wearing a polo than when I'm wearing a clerical collar. And people react differently to a highway patrolman when they're wearing a Class A uniform than when they're wearing a Class C uniform.

And there was a line in our Gospel Lesson today that brought this fact to mind. During his account of the triumphal entry, Matthew quotes a prophecy from the prophet Zechariah, which says, *“Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”*

And it struck me how much God cared about the perception of those crowds in Jerusalem. About how much Jesus wanted to be seen in a very particular way. And he entered Jerusalem on a donkey in order to convey a message.

What was that message? Well, it was a message of humility. He wasn't entering Jerusalem riding a war horse. He wasn't entering Jerusalem on top of a chariot. He wasn't entering Jerusalem being carried by his followers on a golden throne. He certainly wasn't entering Jerusalem leading an army.

No, he was riding a donkey. A beast of burden. Like any other person. Like any other son of man, to use Jesus' own terminology.

And this was significant. Jesus was entering the capital of the Jewish nation. Which didn't actually exist. There was no Jewish nation. It was a Roman province.

But that didn't matter to the people. They had a king. They had a council. They had their own laws. They had convinced themselves that they had never been slaves to anyone, even though common sense said that they had been slaves many times. In their own minds, they were a nation.

And now it was easy to imagine that Jesus was riding into the capital as the conquering hero. The very name “triumphal entry” conveys this idea. Jesus was entering the city as the victor in a great rebellion over the Romans. As the victor in a great civil war against Herod and Jewish political leaders. He was the Son of David and now he was claiming Jerusalem as his capital, just as David once had.

Except he wasn't. He was entering the city in humility. Riding a donkey. Riding the foal of a beast of burden. There was nothing triumphant about the triumphal entry, because he hadn't conquered anyone. And he wasn't claiming that he had.

Alright, that's all well and good for the people of Jesus' day. But why does it matter for us? Matthew felt it was important... Zechariah felt it was important... the Holy Spirit felt it was important that everyone who would read this account in the future knew that Jesus entered the city in humility, riding a donkey. And, obviously, we don't have any particular expectations of Jesus leading a political rebellion or a civil war. So why do we care?

Well, we care because even though we don't expect Jesus to physically overthrow the Romans or physically depose King Herod, we do still see him as the conquering hero. As the conqueror over sin, death, and the devil. As the conqueror over the forces of evil in the spiritual realms. As the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Is that wrong?

Not really. But we have to keep it in perspective. Because Jesus very clearly also wants to be seen in humility. As a king, yes. But as the king who comes to us riding a donkey.

Why does that matter? Consider this: Who would Jesus be conquering if he entered Jerusalem – if he entered this world – in absolute power and might? With all the wrath of God at his fingertips, to strike down evildoers? Who would he be triumphant over?

Sin, death, and the devil? Sure. But also, you and me. He would be coming to conquer us. Because we are workers of sin. We are filled with death. We are pawns of the devil. Every day we give in to our temptations. Every day we break God's Law. Every day we show selfishness toward our neighbor. Every day we show ourselves to be enemies of God in our sinfulness.

So if Jesus had entered the city on a war horse or riding chariot, it would have only meant one thing: the destruction of Jerusalem. The eternal damnation of everyone within its walls. The end of this entire world in fire and smoke. For Jesus to be anything less than humble is for him to be absolutely terrifying.

And that is not how he wanted to be seen. He was not putting on a military uniform and heading off to war. He was putting on the form of a servant. Of someone who was God and yet did not count equality with God as something to be grasped. And this humility didn't begin at Jerusalem and the Triumphal Entry. Oh no, it started long before that.

It's no coincidence that we hear about the Triumphal Entry twice a year. Here, to begin Holy Week, as makes perfect sense. But also one other time: the first Sunday of Advent. Because Jesus' coming into the world – born in a stable, born to a poor Jewish couple, born in the likeness of men – that was when he first began to humble himself.

And after 33 years of life and three years of ministry of being found in that human form by his disciples and all those who he ministered to, he humbled himself even further. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

As Isaiah foretold, he gave his back to those who strike. He gave his cheeks to those who pull out the beard. He hid not his face from disgrace and spitting. And he did it all so that we might know the love and salvation of a God who comes to conquer sin, death, and the devil... without condemning us to hell in the process.

So that we might cry out name of Jesus and know that he who humbled himself for us will help us. So that we might cry out the name of Jesus and know that every knee bows at that name, those in heaven and on earth and under the earth. So that we might cry out the name of Jesus and know that he is Lord over my salvation.

Hosanna to the Son of David! Who comes not to conquer Jerusalem, not to conquer Rome, not to conquer this earth. But instead to give his life as a ransom for many.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is he who comes with the name of the Lord. The name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Hosanna in the highest! Save us Lord, by the humility of the one whose very name means savior.

And teach us that same humility, so that we do not look at this world as a place that needs to be conquered and destroyed, but as a place that needs to be saved. Teach us the humility to see our own sins, repent of them, and know that the God who saves does not strike us down, but gives himself for us. Teach us the humility to see our neighbor's sins not as reason for his condemnation, but as reason for us also to lay down our lives for his salvation.

May we wave palm branches today and every day in celebration for the king who comes to us, humble, riding a donkey. And reassuring us that we will not face his wrath. But instead his wondrous grace. Amen.