

“One Sweet Ride”
Matthew 21:1-11

Your mode of transportation can say a lot about you. If you drive around in a Rolls-Royce, it probably indicates that you have some degree of wealth, status and maybe even power. On the other hand, if you drive a vintage Ford Pinto, people will probably assume that your resources are somewhat limited, and that you don't have very high social status or much power. You are not defined by what you drive, but what you drive does create an impression. Most of us want to get the best car we can, but sometimes people make a conscious choice to drive beneath their means-and that says something about them too. One man I know, who has a substantial income and a fair amount of status and power, drives a Mercedes. But it's not a new one. I'd have to guess it is from the late 70's or early 80's. It is not in good shape. In spite of being a Mercedes, it is what some folks I know would refer to as a “beater”, or in other circles, a “hoopty”. The point is, it's not a very nice a car. But the fact that a well-off influential person drives it communicates something about his priorities and values.

It's always been this way. Before cars, there were different ways of getting around, and these have always communicated something about the wealth, power, status and values of the people who used them. As we look at the story of Palm Sunday, we see how Jesus chose a particular form of transportation to enter Jerusalem, and how he used that choice to communicate important things about himself and his mission.

Jesus created an important **contrast** by choosing to enter Jerusalem on a donkey. I know, Matthew portrays Jesus as riding simultaneously on a donkey and a colt – which is hard to picture. Matthew is the only Gospel author who talks about two animals, and historians tend to think there was just the one donkey. Matthew seems to have misunderstood the poetic form of the prophecy he was quoting and shaped his story to fit that misunderstanding. In any event, Jesus sent his disciples into town to get a donkey, and he then entered Jerusalem riding it, while his disciples and others shouted praises to God.

The contrast Jesus is offering us is one between **the kingdoms of the world** and **the kingdom of God**. The rulers of the world always travel in high style, in a way that is designed to impress and intimidate. Caesar, and Caesar's officials like Pontius Pilate would enter town riding in a military procession, complete with armed guards and war horses. Think about how the Presidents of our country travel. They fly in their own private 747, Air Force One. They fly in their own military helicopter, Marine One. When on the road, they travel in heavily guarded motorcades inside a fortress like, bomb-proof limousine that the Secret Service calls “The Beast” because it is so large and intimidating. That's how all worldly rulers do things. Caesar would no more ride into town on a donkey than President Obama would come to town on a skateboard. It's a ridiculous idea. Unlike Pontius Pilate, who would have entered Jerusalem for Passover in a grand military procession, Jesus came in riding on a young donkey. And Jesus chose this ridiculous contrast to teach us about himself and God's kingdom.

Years earlier, the prophet Zechariah described how God's chosen King would arrive in Jerusalem. In Zechariah 9:9-10, he says that God's anointed ruler will come with righteousness and salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, to take away the chariots and

warhorses that had so oppressed God's people, and to bring peace to the world. And so, Jesus' arrival on a donkey was his way of identifying with Zechariah's prophecy. He meant to communicate first his **gentleness** and **humility**, and secondly, the **non-violent** nature of his Kingdom. He explicitly disassociated himself from the arrogance of earthly rulers who ruled through intimidation, self-promotion and violence. Jesus didn't come as one who was unapproachable or remote from the common person. He wasn't scary. The ordinary person wouldn't dare approach a Caesar or Pontius Pilate – they'd be putting their lives on the line. The common people existed only to serve them and their Empire. But Jesus came in a way with which the ordinary person could identify. No one was afraid of a man on a donkey. He was approachable. In keeping with the values of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed, Jesus didn't see the people as existing to serve him. Instead, he came as one who served the people. Jesus came as a different kind of King. For us, this means not only that Jesus is approachable, but that God is approachable. Christians throughout the centuries have often forgotten this and portrayed God as standing remotely and judgmentally over us, ready to destroy us when we step out of line, but Jesus didn't reveal that kind of God. Surely, God is not pleased by everything we do. But this is a God that we can come to with our concerns, our fears and our hopes and dreams. This is a God who actually cares about us and wants us to draw near. This is a God to whom we can confess our sins and receive forgiveness, compassion and love. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in this way is an invitation to us to see God as present with us, accessible to us, and gentle toward us.

One person I know goes to a certain large, popular church. He has some very strong opinions about God, and they are based largely on fear. His church has taught him about how angry God is with him for all the evil he has done, and how he is bound for an eternity in hell if he doesn't accept that church's vision of Jesus. Note that it isn't just Jesus he must accept, but their particular view of Jesus. And so, his emotional state wavers between fear of not properly believing in Jesus, and self-righteous judgment toward others for not having the right kind of faith. In fact, the more he judges others, the more secure he feels about his own faith. Ultimately, he is scared to death of Jesus, and of God. Friends, this is not the kind of God Jesus came to reveal. The image of Jesus given to that young man was not the friend of sinners or the humble, gentle, peace-bringing King who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Somehow, he has been given the vision of a Jesus who rules like Caesar, through intimidation, violence and fear. I realize that some of the later New Testament authors, and the Book of Revelation in particular, can be used to reinforce such a portrait. But the real, live, flesh and blood Jesus that we meet in the Gospels did not reveal that kind of God. He revealed a God of compassion, gentleness and non-violence. That's the God to whom Jesus invites us to come.

Of course, you probably know how the rest of the story goes. Pontius Pilate and others who ruled through fear and intimidation felt threatened by Jesus' kingdom of peace, and his vision of a God who was actually for the people. They struck out at him and sent him to his death; they crucified him. Ironically, it is through the cross that **true power** is revealed. They did the worst they could to destroy Jesus' vision of a God who loves and forgives, and who rules peacefully without intimidation and cruelty. But Easter Sunday showed whose version of God and reality is correct. True power resides not with those who have the biggest armies, the most money, or the most political might, it resides with the God we meet in Jesus. The God who comes to us, humbly riding on a donkey, offering us the power of love and forgiveness,

inviting us to experience salvation and peace. It's an offer that calls for a response – not a response of fear, but rather, a response of love and gratitude.