

April 14, 2019
Who Will Have the Throne?
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Matthew 21:1-17

21 *When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

⁵ “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

¹² Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³ He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry ¹⁶ and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

¹⁷ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

At its heart, Jewish Passover celebrates a successful slave revolt in ancient Egypt. An insurgency. A rebellion. The enslaved people, the Hebrews, executed a divinely-designed plan, forty-hundred years in the making, by which they walked out of the

country, led by the Pharaoh's own adopted son. The entire Egyptian army failed to capture them.

Matthew re-creates the image in Matthew 21. In Jesus' time, every spring at Passover time, the Roman governor of Judea, a man named ___?___ (Pontius Pilate) left his palace at Caesarea and traveled east to his palace in Jerusalem, escorted by a cavalry regiment of Roman soldiers – a show of force in a time of potential trouble. Their mission was peacekeeping. *Peacekeeping*, sigh. Empire gas-lighting language. Order that has nothing in common with peace, known for enslaving half the people therein and ruling the rest with an iron fist.

In that particular year, 29 CE give or take, as Pontius Pilate made his journey from the west, a Galilean rabbi set out from the east, an unarmed man accompanied by a parade of palm-waving peasants. He will not fight, we say, but neither will he dodge. Nor negotiate. *Who will bend the knee? Who will have the throne?*

Let's pray: *Peace. We wish, O God, hardly knowing what we wish for. Not to be afraid. Not to feel ashamed about the suffering caused by the very systems that render us so privileged. We mostly know peace enforced by soldiers, armed to their teeth and toenails against people who hate us, who would kill us if they could. We pray to know the peace you died to give us, armed with nothing but your creative, loving grace. Loving grace that breaks fear and hate and selfishness. Loving grace that calls forth laughter, faith, and courage, the very currency of peace, O God, unlimited and free. Amen.*

The city was in turmoil, Matthew says. It's Jerusalem after all. *Then Jesus went to the Temple.* We know the point of the gospel, that Jesus picked a fight with the ruler of darkness over who would bend the knee. And he won. Death lost. Death bends the knee to life forevermore. But the point doesn't make the telling unimportant. So, as for the telling, why do all four gospel writers include Jesus' Temple tantrum and why do the synoptics all link it with his final entry to Jerusalem?

If Jesus' fight is with the rulers of this world – to be specific, with Rome – why does he visit the Temple before he visits Pilate? Why does he fire his first round, if you will, at religion, instead of empire? Could be he's cleaning up his own backyard first? Judaism was his own religion, after all. But then again, religion itself was his own, I suppose. And instead of the backyard, he tidied the front porch, the courtyard of the Temple, where even Gentiles and women were allowed to walk around. He shows up and announces in verse 13, *my Father's house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.*

The layers and layers of imagery in that sentence! He's quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. *The Temple was the spot on the earth that marked where Eden was planted. The spot on the earth that remembered where Abraham took Isaac for sacrifice. The meeting place*

of heaven and earth in Jacob's dream. A house of prayer, given into the care of men who have, Jesus said, made it into a den of thieves.

You know who lives in dens? Foxes, in the woods behind my house. They keep their babies, their kits, in their dens. And you know what else? The chickens they steal from my henhouse, when I accidentally leave the door open – which is okay, because they are foxes. Stealing chickens is what they are born and bred to do. You know who doesn't live in dens? Leaders of institutional religion. They live in nice houses. They work in fancy buildings, with steeples and stained glass with Bible verses. Their job – our job – is to pray, to teach, and to serve. Yet, Jesus says, in the Temple in Jerusalem at Passover, *Is not the fox loose in the henhouse?*

But this is the chicks walking into the foxes' den, voluntarily. Jews came from everywhere and stayed a few days. They had Temple offerings and sacrifices to make. Animals purchased from vendors vetted by the Temple. No doubt farmers paid for that privilege, farmers who bought booth space in the Temple courtyard which, naturally, could only be purchased with Temple coin. So they had first to go to the moneychangers, who had also bought vendor space, which they recouped in exchange fees. Temple coin wasn't good anywhere else, naturally, so it had either to be left as offering or changed back – again at a fee, no doubt.

Rome may well be who Jesus was after, but Religion was his first stop. And that feels really, really important to me. The Temple is first. Religion is first. The clergy are first. Prayer is first. The people at the top of the prayer pyramid, the ones most accountable for praying – weren't. And would have been better off, had they only been *not praying*. But they were being worse than *not praying*. They were robbing the very people they were supposed to comfort and to lead. Worse than an Empire that enslaves is a religion that robs the poor souls they might have blessed. Sit with that. Sit with that a long time.

Jesus comes to save the world, and in his triage, the ones who most need saving are the ones who think they're saved already, neck deep with the empire in the abuse and exploitation of people entrusted to their care, using God as their explanation. But Jesus wasn't having it. His Temple "tantrum," if you will, is not a fit of anger. He hasn't lost control. Nor has he discovered something other people don't know. Everyone knows. Just like everyone knows – in every age knows – that power and money drive everything, including the meaning of words like *peace*. Oppression and injustice count as peace, to the ones who make the rules. Jesus discovers nothing new, only points to what everyone can see already and says: *Not. In. My. House.*

For their part, Temple keepers are so offended to be called out as corrupt, they join forces with Pilate. Not because they are Jewish, either, friends; please don't hear me say that. Because they are people with some power in a land where most people have none. They do exactly what people like them always do – religious people who will suck the

hind tit of the empire, no matter how much it costs us in holiness, decency, or faith. We'll trade most anything for power, then find a way to make ourselves look righteous. Jesus sought no endorsements from anyone, certainly not politicians or priests – people useless to him in this fight.

Think of it: in his fight against evil and corruption, religion is against him. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, my friends, as I'm not sure that I do? Maybe that winter is coming in ways we don't yet understand. In this looming showdown as to who shall have the throne – Pilate or Jesus – we know we're only pretending not to know, going through the motions of treating Jesus like an underdog. But we know he wins, and next week will be Easter! Have we yet taken seriously that it is us whom Jesus visits first, on his way to save the world? Us – whose lost-ness seems to have upset him most? Or, at least, first?

Apart from our long-awaited TV shows, we have trouble with the whole idea of kings. And thrones. And bending the knee. Which leaves us easily passing off these priests and scribes as folks who should have known better, missing what Matthew means the church to see and hear. *We* are temple now. We are the house of prayer. And if we've come to know the meaning of his passion – this world's need of grace – none need it, none need Him, more than us. We who think we know it all. Who've written stories to justify everything we do. *If he's talking to the people of his religion, then he must be talking to us, to me.*

Every one of us worships something. Thrones and bended knees or not, we are subject all the same. May we be subject to the God of grace, come to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.