

#### *iv. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (12:12–19)*

The triumphal entry is one of the few events in Jesus' ministry that is recorded in all four Gospels ([Matt. 21:1–11](#)/[Mark 11:1–11](#)/[Luke 19:28–40](#)/[John 12:12–19](#)). It was a crucial event in which Jesus, by a dramatic act, presented himself to Jerusalem as her king, in accordance with prophecy.

**12–13.** The evangelist begins his account, *The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.* It was the day after the anointing at Bethany that the pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover heard that Jesus was approaching. The population of Jerusalem swelled enormously at Passover time. Josephus, a first-century Jewish writer, says that when a count was taken on one occasion the numbers present for Passover reached 2,700,000, a figure hard to believe, given the size of first-century Jerusalem.<sup>63</sup> Certainly, vast numbers of people came to Jerusalem for this festival. No doubt influenced by Jesus' growing fame, *they took palm branches and went out to meet him.* Palm fronds were used by pilgrims at the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication as part of the worship (see commentary on [7:2](#) and [10:22–39](#)). Palm branches were also used as symbols of victory and kingship. By meeting Jesus with palm branches the crowd showed they were welcoming him as king. Earlier in his ministry he eluded the crowds who wanted to make him king ([6:15](#)), but now he accepted their gesture and its significance.

As well as waving palm branches, the crowd was shouting, 'Hosanna!' / 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' This acclamation is based on [Psalm 118:25–26](#). The literal meaning of 'Hosanna' is 'save now'. By the first century the word may have

<sup>63</sup> [Josephus, Jewish War vi.422–425](#): 'That the city could contain so many is clear from the count taken under Cestius. For he, being anxious to convince Nero, who held the nation in contempt, of the city's strength, instructed the chief priests, if by any means possible, to take a census of the population. Accordingly, on the occasion of the feast called Passover, at which they sacrifice from the ninth to the eleventh hour, and a little fraternity, as it were, gathers round each sacrifice, of not fewer than ten persons (feasting alone not being permitted), while the companies often included as many as twenty, the victims were counted and amounted to two hundred and fifty-five thousand six hundred; allowing an average of ten diners to each victim, we obtain a total of two million seven hundred thousand, all pure and holy.'

lost its literal sense and was used, as it is today, simply as a shout of praise. The words ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ in their original context are addressed to pilgrims coming to the temple:

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.

From the house of the LORD we bless *you*.

The LORD is God,

and he has made his light shine upon us.

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession

up to the horns of the altar.

(Ps. 118:26–27)

The ‘you’ in these verses is plural, and the picture is of those already at the temple blessing God for the arrival of other pilgrims. There would be nothing surprising, then, about the crowds welcoming Jesus in this way. However, in Jesus’ case more was involved, because they greeted him with palm branches (symbols of victory and kingship), and the acclamation *Blessed is the King of Israel!* The NIV translation here represents a modification of the original. Literally translated it would read ‘even the King of Israel’. Jesus accepted their acclamation of the pilgrims, unlike his reaction to earlier attempts by the crowd to make him king (cf. 6:15).

14–15. To make his final approach to Jerusalem Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it. He did not need to ride the last couple of miles—he was used to walking long distances, and would have been physically fit. Also, pilgrims usually approached the holy city on foot. Jesus’ action made a statement. The evangelist makes this plain by his OT quotation:

*as it is written,*


*Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion;*

*see, your king is coming,*

*seated on a donkey’s colt.*

The quotation is from Zechariah 9:9, where the Lord is portrayed not in a militaristic fashion mounted on a war-horse but as a king of peace sitting on a donkey <sup>64</sup>. In fact,

<sup>64</sup> The evangelist’s quotation of Zech. 9:9 corresponds exactly with no known version of this text. It is possible he was quoting from memory, or using a version of the LXX no longer extant.

the following verse, [Zechariah 9:10](#), says he will take away chariots and war-horses from Ephraim and Jerusalem, and proclaim peace to the nations. In conscious fulfillment of this prophecy [Jesus](#) entered Jerusalem on a donkey to show he was the king of the Jews, not the militaristic Messiah of popular expectation but the universal prince of peace .

**16.** The evangelist says, *At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after [Jesus](#) was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.* In this matter, as in others, [Jesus](#)' disciples only realized the significance of things after [Jesus](#)' death and resurrection ([2:22](#); [13:7](#), [12](#), [28](#)). [Jesus](#) promised that the [Holy Spirit](#), when he came, would make these things clear to them ([14:26](#); [16:12–15](#)).

**17–18.** *Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word.* Among those accompanying [Jesus](#) on his ride into Jerusalem were many who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus at Bethany, and they were spreading the word to other pilgrims. The result was, *Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him.* Thus the numbers of those who went out to meet him continued to swell. The evangelist refers to the raising of Lazarus as 'this miraculous sign'. It is the last and greatest of the signs recorded in the Book of Signs ([1:19–12:50](#)), the record of [Jesus](#)' work in the world.

**19.** The escalating popularity of [Jesus](#) caused consternation among his opponents: *So the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere.'* 'This' may refer to the order they gave that anyone who knew [Jesus](#)' whereabouts should make it known to them so they might arrest him ([11:57](#)). However, events had moved on quickly. [Jesus](#) was now appearing openly and in public places. Even though the Pharisees knew where he was, they could not arrest him because he was held in such esteem by the populace—as the Pharisees said to one another, *Look how the whole world has gone after him!*