

GREAT SINNERS BUT A GREATER SAVIOUR
Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Advent, 2025
Matthew 21:1-11

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 21:1-11, our Gospel read before: ¹**Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples,** ²**saying to them, “Go into the village in front 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, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.”** ⁴**This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying,**

⁵ **“Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’ ”**

⁶**The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them.** ⁷**They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them.** ⁸**Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.** ⁹**And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** ¹⁰**And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?”** ¹¹**And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Does it not seem odd that on the first day of Advent, that our Gospel lesson for today was on Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? Is this not a text that we typically read on Palm Sunday? So why on earth did we read this Palm Sunday text today as we begin the Advent Season? Shouldn't we be reading Bible passages about the manger, the wise men, the star, Mary and Joseph?

Actually, today is the first day of Advent, not Easter as you all know. Furthermore, it is truly fitting and proper to have Matthew 21 as the Gospel reading for today since the word ‘Advent’ is Latin for ‘coming.’ Thus, today marks the beginning of the Advent season, a time when we celebrate God’s coming to us. That is what Christmas ultimately celebrates. Indeed, each Sunday of this Advent season is a celebration—if you like, a countdown—to Christmas—the birth of Jesus; God with us. Yes, each Sunday is a celebration of Christ’s coming into the world in a manger. Therefore, when we consider the Gospel text for today, it begins to make sense.

In our Gospel lesson, we see that Jesus is approaching the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy made by Zechariah some 550 years earlier. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, **“the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** We sing the same song each time we pray the Communion liturgy. The familiar words of the Sanctus remind us that *the same Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey comes to us in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper*. We would never guess that we are receiving the true body and blood of our Saviour in the Sacrament, but Jesus says, *“This is My body... This is My blood.”* Through the eyes of faith, we see much more than bread and wine, because our ears have heard what Jesus said. And so it is with the original Palm Sunday parade; the words of the Old Testament prophets in Zechariah 9:9 and also Psalm 118:26 tell us what to look for, and our eyes are opened so that we can really see.

We must also remember that Jesus wasn't heading to Jerusalem for a weekend escape. He wasn't going to Jerusalem for a week-long conference. Instead, Jesus came to Jerusalem some two thousand years ago to die. He was on a mission, with His eyes fixed on the cross. Repeatedly in the four Gospels, we see Jesus telling the disciples that He needed to go, that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Therefore, by reflecting on Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey on this first day of Advent, it reminds us that Jesus came into the world not to be served, but to serve us and give His life as a ransom for you and me.

This offers a completely different outlook on the Christmas season. Mary became pregnant, and Jesus was born so that He might die. He was born to die. Yes, the Advent season is a time when God comes to mankind, and Christmas Day is when the God-man Jesus meets humanity. From Christmas onward, we see that Jesus' life moves towards and *leads to the cross*.

It's quite remarkable to step back and realise that Jesus was born with the purpose of going to the cross. It's fascinating to think about Jesus' focus and intent being centred on the cross, where He would suffer and die. **“When (Jesus) entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?”¹ And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”** Calling Jesus a “prophet” recalled the Galilean phase of His ministry, when He was just beginning to gain fame for His teaching and healing.¹ By this point, however, the crowds openly praise Him as Messiah, but by the end of the week, they would be calling for His crucifixion. Christ understood this, and He faced pain and suffering head-on. In fact, He rode straight into it.

How many enjoy heading towards or facing conflict, pain, and struggles? You're approaching a dental appointment where you know teeth must be removed. Who looks forward to that? You feel a cold coming on—who enjoys that? When you think of a hospital, how many of you like going into hospitals? When you have a marital conflict and are finishing work for the day, how many of you are eager to confront an upset spouse? When you're expecting a large credit card bill and head to the mailbox, are you excited or dreading seeing that envelope? When someone is disappointed with you or you've had a past conflict, how many of you want to go and hang out with that person?

The reality is that we try to avoid conflicts, pain, and struggles at all costs. This is part of what some call our survival instinct. We don't naturally walk into pain, struggles, or conflict. To be clear, much of this is healthy because we are meant to be good stewards of our bodies, health, and wellbeing. It's not wise or godly to subject ourselves to things that could cause harm or intentionally jeopardise our ability to parent and serve others who rely on us. But let me ask you this: *how are we doing in dealing with our sin?*

You see, as members of the church, we are very diligent in recognising and calling out sin. In fact, both church attendees and complete pagans are quite skilled at pointing out the speck of sin in others' lives.² Indeed, we're very good at identifying sin in others, but we usually do nothing about it *except distance ourselves*. Furthermore, when we face our own sin, we try to avoid it at all costs. For example, we deny our sin—"I didn't do anything wrong"—we run from our past sins, that is, we keep them locked away in the closet. We blame others—"The devil made me do it"; we minimise our sin by saying it's not as bad as other major sins—"At least I'm not like those people." We try to overcome our sin through doing many good works, and we drown out our guilt with illegal substances or over-the-counter drugs. Truly, we are masters at escaping from our own sin, *always keeping it at arm's length*.

So, what do we learn today not only from our Gospel Reading but from all of our texts³, and what does this Advent Season teach us about the sin we try to avoid?

¹ Matthew 13:57; 14:5; 16:14

² Matthew 7:3

³ Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:8-14

Surely it is that we believe, teach, and confess each Advent Season that the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, was born into this world for sinners, for you and me. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ approached our sin in His birth, and He approached our sin on the donkey as He rode into Jerusalem towards Calvary's cross. And get this, upon that cross—a cross that should've been for you and for me, a cross where you and I are not only unable to pay for our sin but a cross that we are totally and utterly afraid of—Jesus encountered your sin and mine, bore it upon Himself, was forsaken by the Father, endured hell, and then said, "*It is finished!*"

The very sin that causes us to step back from is the sin that Jesus stepped towards and into when He was born in the manger. The very sin that we try not to own is the sin that Jesus owned as His own on the cross. He did this because He loves us and is not willing to let us perish. Like a boxer stepping into the opponent's punches to deliver a knock-out uppercut, Christ stepped into our sin, He stepped into our death; He stepped into hell on that cross... and said, "*It is finished.*" These words echo throughout eternity, and they are words especially for you and for me right here and right now.

That is what Advent is about. It is about the God of the universe not being content to leave us helpless and alone in our sins, but rather pursuing us and ultimately bringing death to sin.

This changes everything! Because of Christ and His mission of coming to you and me, we can confess with boldness that we are indeed great sinners but that we have a greater Saviour. There is no need to deny our sin, blame, minimise, and so forth! Rather, when the world and the devil throw your sins in your face and declare that you deserve death and hell, we can confess with Martin Luther, "I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is there I shall be also!"

Dear friends, Christ came for us. We have been baptised into His death and resurrection, and so we begin this Advent Season celebrating His coming in the flesh for us. We also look forward to when He comes again — not riding humbly on a donkey, but in power and great might, as our Almighty King and Saviour. To Him be all glory! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.