

A Clean Sweep
Matthew 21:1-14

This time last year, I think we were all ready to say “good riddance” to 2020. But as 2021 now recedes in the rearview mirror, we find ourselves in a very familiar situation: looking forward to yet another chance for a new beginning, and hoping that this time we won’t be so disappointed.

Well, the Jerusalem crowd on Palm Sunday was also longing for a change, and their expectations were sky-high as Jesus rode into His capital city. They called Him the Son of David, thus confessing that He was their long-awaited Messiah. And they expected Him to fulfill the words of the prophets who promised that He would bring justice to all the nations – vindicating the righteous and punishing the wicked for their sins.

And maybe that’s what you want Jesus to do in this new year. Maybe you’re sick of government gridlock or onerous regulations. Maybe you’re tired of politicians making promises that they either can’t or won’t keep. Maybe you want Jesus to clear the decks of all those things or people or institutions that seem to be holding you back, that are preventing you from making progress. Maybe you’re longing for justice, in the same way that the Palm Sunday crowd did.

But of course they wanted much more than freedom from Roman oppression – they also clamored for Jesus to continue His ministry of healing. After all, right after Jesus called His first disciples to follow Him, chapter 4 tells us that He began to heal people from every kind of sickness and disease. And He had kept on performing such marvels – the previous passage at the end of chapter 20 tells us how, as He left Jericho on His way to Jerusalem, He had just restored the sight of two blind men.

No, it’s no wonder that He was constantly surrounded by insistent, hopeful crowds – for how many of us would line up to have Jesus cast out our own chronic pain, or cancer or Covid for that matter? Just like that ancient Palm Sunday crowd, don’t we continue to cry out for Jesus to heal us and our loved ones?

And the good news is that many of those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem did experience such miracles. After all, verse 14 tells us that after He had gone into the Temple, he kept on healing even those who were most obviously and undeniably sick – the lame and the blind. And we can be sure that the Son of David still has the power to heal all our diseases just as He is able to bring perfect justice to our messed-up world.

But this whole passage goes even further, making it clear that Jesus has absolute authority, absolute control over every aspect of our lives. For think about it: He was able not only to predict the location of a particular donkey and her colt in a village the disciples had not yet visited. He was also able to command their use even from someone who was probably a perfect stranger. So, could any of the difficult circumstances of our lives lie outside His jurisdiction? Could any of our problems be too insignificant to deserve His attention, let alone be too difficult for Him to solve?

So, in this New Year, of course we should follow the example of the Palm Sunday crowd in longing for a clean sweep, crying out for Jesus to save us and heal us, to set all things right and make all things new. In fact, as we come to this table, our expectations should be even higher than theirs. For as we recall what happened less than a week after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we should

remember that Jesus is not only our mighty Messiah, but also our loving Lord, the Lamb of God Who sacrificed His own body and blood so that we might have eternal life with Him forever. And so we can be sure that Jesus can do much more than bring healing to our broken bodies and justice to our broken land – His blood can wash our very souls clean of all our sins.

It is this amazing truth that we affirm when we come to this table, taking this bread and this fruit of the vine into ourselves in remembrance of Jesus' great gift of Himself to us. But as we thus claim the oneness with Christ that we enjoy by trusting Him to be our Savior and Lord, we need to remember another of this table's obvious lessons: there's just no way that a tiny piece of bread and a mere sip of juice can possibly assuage our physical hunger and thirst. Just because we come to this table – indeed, just because we come to Christ in true faith doesn't mean that all the outward, material circumstances of our lives will be transformed.

And Jesus tried to temper the worldly expectations of the Palm Sunday crowd in a similar way, didn't He? For given his ability both to predict the whereabouts and to command the use of Jerusalem's livestock, He could easily have chosen to ride into His capital city on a powerful warhorse. After all, that's what the crowd expected Him to do – to lead them in a revolt against the hated Romans, to bring justice to their oppressors, to give them vindication from their enemies right then and right there.

And yet He went to rather extraordinary lengths to make His grand entrance into Jerusalem, not on a warhorse or in a chariot, but on a donkey, and one that still had a colt trailing along after her. It's hard to imagine anything further from a mighty, martial image – Jesus' feet rather ridiculously dragging the ground and his mount stopping every so often to let her baby nurse. No Roman emperor or governor would ever appear in public in such a ridiculous, even humiliating way.

But according to the prophet Zechariah, whom Matthew quotes in verse 5, that's exactly the sort of King God would provide for His people: One Who would not be cruel and violent, but humble and gentle, One Who would come to meet His people's most serious spiritual needs but not necessarily all their material desires. Yes, Jesus would be a King alright, but instead of sweeping the Romans out of power in Jerusalem, by the end of the week He would offer Himself up as a sacrifice to destroy enemies that were even more devastating: sin and death.

And Jesus gave yet another clear indication of His true mission on Palm Sunday. For instead of marching to the barracks of the Roman legions and using His miraculous powers to put them to flight, He went into the Temple of the Lord and threw out those who were making a profit off of the people's piety. In short, instead of solving the people's political problems, He first pointed to their need for spiritual purity.

And we would do well to share Jesus' priorities. Yes, as citizens who have the power to elect those who hold public office, we have to pay attention to what they are doing, and we have to think about what policies would be best for all levels of government. But the sad truth is that not even the wisest system of government and not even the godliest set of laws and not even the most honest and able public officials are able to solve our biggest problem – the self-centered sin that lies within every human heart. For unless our hearts are changed, unless we become a people truly devoted to the glory of God and the needs of one another we won't see any real reformation or restoration of our society.

No, the only real answer to all our problems is the one that doesn't seem to make any practical difference at all: simple faith in Jesus Christ. After all, a bite of bread and sip of juice can't satisfy our physical hunger. And preaching and praying may not seem to be of any real use where it comes to solving the biggest problems of our society: family dysfunction and poverty, drug abuse and homelessness, violence and hatred. Yes, Jesus rules and reigns as the Son of David, the Lord's Messiah, but on Palm Sunday He made it clear that He's not going to fix all the injustice and the sickness in the world – at least not right now, not until He comes again.

But if we'll bow before our humble King, and if we'll accept the justice and the healing He brings to us on His terms and according to His timetable, if we'll seek to put our own spiritual house in order, devoting ourselves to the Word of God and prayer, throwing out all the selfishness and callous lack of concern we might have for our brothers and sisters in Christ, the food on this table might just make all the difference in the world.

For as Christ truly comes to live within us by faith, and as we let Him make a clean sweep of our hearts, and as we surrender more and more areas of our lives to His sovereign control, can we doubt that He will bring healing to our minds, our affections, our relationships, and even our bodies? And as more and more people come to follow His example of selfless service and unconditional love, can we doubt that our whole society will begin to reflect His justice and His mercy and His truth more clearly?

So as this new year dawns, let us come to the Table, trusting in the Son of David to forgive us and cleanse us, to give us new lives. But let us depart from the Table as true followers of our King, devoting ourselves completely to His service, seeking His purity and holiness, and demonstrating His justice and unconditional love.