

Reflections on Palm Sunday

This Sunday in the standard lectionary is celebrated as either the [Liturgy of Palms](#) or the [Liturgy of the Passion](#). For a long time, St. John has celebrated Palm Sunday. It is a Liturgy full of meaning, and besides, we can tie the palms into crosses during our coffee hour!

Every Palm Sunday I think of my academic advisor from the year that I spent at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. He had published a slim volume on Matthew's gospel ("God with Us") and he was much taken by Matthew's use of various symbols to represent the importance of two in his telling of Jesus' story. He was much amused by Matthew 21:7, which reads: "They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them." He would frequently ask me how I thought Jesus could ride both at the same time.

A 1320 painting by [Pietro Lorenzetti](#), shown below, depicts the entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. He is indeed riding two animals, the mother donkey and her colt. It is commonly thought that Jesus enters the city on a donkey which symbolizes his arrival as the Prince of Peace rather than as a war-waging king arriving on a horse. Some say that Jesus rode the colt to symbolize his kingly status while the mother was brought along to calm the colt.



I was never taken by my advisor's jokes about Matthew's gospel. Perhaps our taste in humor was different, but Matthew is always deadly serious and any writer of his period and ilk would have thought through the Jesus story and told it with a heavy reliance on symbolism as well as allusions and references to the Old Testament. That Jesus rides donkey to represent his entry as peaceful king rather than riding in as a warrior king is one of many such symbols in his gospel.

But why is the symbolism associated with the number two so vital to Matthew? Christians often think of symbols coming in groups of three, like the loops in a pretzel, to represent the Trinity. But why two? Many events, places, and people we meet in the Bible have two aspects to them. For example, Jerusalem is described as both the holy city that holds the temple where heaven meets earth and as the city that kills the prophets sent by God.

A careful look at Lorenzetti's artwork does indeed show Jesus riding two donkeys, a colt and its mother, but also with a halo around the head of Jesus. Jesus is both a man riding the colt and a heavenly figure with the halo. But Matthew calls Jesus "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." Surely Lorenzetti knew this and so the halo must depict Jesus as the divine Son of God.

Since the fifth century the church in the east and west has held to a formal teaching describing their belief that Jesus Christ must be both God and man. This teaching is perhaps as hard to understand as the idea of the Trinity, but there it is woven into the very fabric of Matthew's gospel with his constant use of symbols for two.

With the exception of the Copts in Egypt, all Christian churches today confess that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. There are also lesser dual symbols associated with the roles played by Jesus; he is both militant and nonviolent, both crucified and resurrected, both royal and humble. Simultaneously both are true and both are essential to his work on our behalf.

The Presbyterian pastor Lawrence Farris writes: "The text calls its hearers to the hard but utterly essential struggle with grasping Christ's dual nature. Grasping either aspect of Christ's nature without its counterpoint distorts the Gospel."

The New Testament insists that in Jesus of Nazareth we meet a very human man and we meet the fullness of God. The Lutheran reformers were emphatic about their belief in and commitment to this teaching. The modern church often tends to simplify or downplay this Christian claim, but I believe that Farris is essentially correct, that we should hold fast to this teaching and wrestle with it when the lectionary readings point us in that direction.