

*“...The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live...” (Ecclesiastes 9:3)*

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before the high God?*

*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;  
and what doth the LORD require of thee,  
but to do justly, and to love mercy,  
and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6.<sup>6,8</sup>)*

So shall it not be among you: the nature of true greatness and real power

## Part 7<sup>1</sup>

Meek and sitting upon an ass

Matthew 21.<sup>1-9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, <sup>2</sup>Saying unto them, “Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. <sup>3</sup>And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, ‘The Lord hath need of them;’ and straightway he will send them.”

<sup>4</sup>All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>“Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.”

<sup>6</sup>And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, <sup>7</sup>And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. <sup>8</sup>And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. <sup>9</sup>And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.”

### Introduction to the series

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Mine is not, of course, the only way to structure or understand the synoptic Gospels. But it is one way. And it is a way that speaks to me. Perhaps it will speak to you as well.

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<sup>1</sup> In this series of homilies, we will explore the topic of “The Nature of True Greatness and Real Power” through the following texts: Matthew 16.<sup>13-23</sup>; Matthew 16.<sup>24-26</sup>; Luke 9.<sup>28-36, 44-45</sup>; Mark 9.<sup>33-37</sup>; Luke 9.<sup>51-56</sup>; Mark 10.<sup>35-45</sup>; Matthew 21.<sup>1-5</sup>; John 13.<sup>4-17</sup>; Philippians 2.<sup>1-11</sup>; Revelation 5.<sup>1-7</sup>; and (Matthew 27.<sup>33-50</sup> // Mark 15.<sup>22-37</sup> // Luke 23.<sup>33-46</sup> // John 19.<sup>17-30</sup>).

As I understand the movement of the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—approximately the first half of their narratives regularly report on miracles that Jesus performed in a very public demonstration of his greatness and power. Between the three synoptic Gospels, nearly 75% of the miracles traditionally identified as having been performed by Jesus (and over 80% in the case of Matthew and Mark) were reported in the first half of the Gospels.<sup>i</sup>

For example, in his book of roughly 24,000 words (in the KJV), Matthew records twenty-three traditionally identified miracles performed by Jesus. By the 12,000-word mark, Matthew has already recorded nineteen of them, leaving but four for the final 12,000 words. It is around the 12,000-word mark that Matthew arrives at Peter’s confession, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” with Jesus’ accompanying warning of his impending rejection and death, Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, and Jesus’ necessary rebuke of Peter as the latter demonstrates his misunderstanding concerning the true meaning and nature of Messianic greatness and power reflected in Jesus’ miracles.

These observations are more than a trifling bit of math wizardry. Peter’s confession represents a turning point in the Gospels, and, perhaps, in Jesus’ ministry. With this confession and rebuke comes a shift in emphasis and purpose. The second half of the synoptic Gospels’ arc contains far, far fewer reports of miracles. Replacing these reports of miracles are reports of Jesus’ attempts to help his disciples understand the true nature of the greatness and power that they accurately witness in his miracles. In addition, it is in association with Peter’s confession that Jesus speaks for the first time directly and openly of his looming rejection and death. He will, the text informs us, “from that time forth” issue predictions and warnings concerning his ultimate rejection and death.

Perhaps this Gospel structure represented a reality and necessity of Jesus’ actual earthly ministry. Perhaps the Gospel writers (or me) imposed the structure upon Jesus’ earthly ministry in order to teach a principle that they had gleaned from Jesus’ earthly ministry. Either way, there is much to learn from this structure.

Here is one of the principles we can glean from the structure. It is the principle upon which this series of homilies focuses. It is a principle, I believe, that Jesus himself held and lived by. It is a principle, I believe, that he attempted to pass on to his disciples.

True greatness and power; the kind of greatness and power that God exercises is something completely different than what the world imagines it to be. God possesses and exercises greatness and power very differently and out of very different motives than human beings themselves possess and wield greatness and power, such as it is. Further, God possesses and exercises greatness and power very differently and out of very different motives than human beings imagine and expect that *He* does. Finally, human beings must resist and reject the world's false ideas of the nature of greatness and power and adopt those of God. Only by so doing can human beings possess even the slightest glimmer of hope for peace in this world and an abiding existence in the world to come. To exercise greatness and power in a manner contrary to God's manner is to invite chaos and sure annihilation and extinction.

In this series of homilies we make the same points over and over again. We do so in a variety of ways. Hopefully, the repetition does grow weary. But, the fact is, the world as it is today is proof positive that it has not heard or heeded our Lord's warning voice. The world continues to suffer under notions of greatness and power that can only be described as anti-Christ. So, apparently, one can't speak the words of God too often. One can't speak too often of the nature of true greatness and real power as it exists in God and as it must exist in mortals. And, of course, the word of God never, ever grows mundane, but remains always vibrant and lively and quick and powerful and discerning.

Finally, a reminder. What we are doing here is homily, not commentary. We cannot, then, leave it at explication and discovery. We must move to application. We hope that this series encourages the reader to examine their own attitudes toward greatness and their own use of power, such as it is. In addition, we hope that the reader examines the world around them; examines those who are thought great and who exercise power in their community, in their church, in their state, in their nation—in their life—and hold them up against Jesus' standard. Do they, imperfect as they are, strive to exercise power as Jesus exercised it and as Jesus

taught his disciples to exercise it? If so, then praise God. If not, then they must be challenged to do and be better. If they refuse to repent, they must be rejected and we more skilled in choosing to whom we grant power.

Very practical and applicable, this series of homilies.

### **i** Introduction to today's homily

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The disciples have been with Jesus for some three years. With him, they have visited many places and witnessed many events. They were with him in the district of Cæsarea Philippi. There, they confessed him to be the Christ. There, Jesus issued his first warning concerning his impending rejection and death. There, they joined their inspired confession about him with their satanic rebuke of him. There, Jesus warned them that they had misunderstood the nature of his greatness and power. There, he informed them that true greatness and power—his and, by virtue of their discipleship, theirs—was manifest by taking up a cross and denying oneself for the advancement of others rather than self

The disciples were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. There, they witnessed his glory. There, they witnessed a discussion conducted between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah concerning his upcoming rejection and death. There, they slumbered, avoiding once more the unwelcome truth. There, they heard the voice of God urging them to listen to what Jesus was trying to tell them—about himself and about themselves.

The disciples were with Jesus at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration. There, he issued his second direct warning concerning his rejection and death. But there, once more, “they understood not this saying, and it was hid from them, that they perceived it not...”

The disciples were with Jesus outside Capernaum. There, still oblivious, they argued amongst themselves about who was greatest in the kingdom. The disciples were with Jesus inside Capernaum when he shamed them by asking what they had been arguing about. There,

Jesus presented a little child as a representation of the kind of greatness and power Jesus possessed and expected his disciples to develop if they hoped to be citizens of his kingdom.

The disciples were with Jesus outside a Samaritan village. There, they witnessed Jesus being rejected and rebuffed by its citizens. There, the disciples once more displayed their satanic impulses by musing about the need and appropriateness of destroying the village and burning its occupants to death. There, Jesus rebuked them once more for misunderstanding and seeking to misuse greatness and power. True greatness and power found ways to deliver. It did not seek ways to harm or destroy.

The disciples were with Jesus outside of Jerusalem as “he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.”<sup>2</sup> There, again, he warned them of his impending ordeal.

“Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: <sup>34</sup>and they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again.”<sup>3</sup>

There, the disciples once more sought and fought over status, over greatness, over power. There, once more, Jesus patiently taught them that true greatness and power did not take the twisted form that they were accustomed to seeing in the kingdoms of this world. There, Jesus reminded them that true greatness and power—his and theirs—was self-sacrificing in the lowly service of others.

Now, the disciples are with Jesus at Beth-phage. Here, he will offer them another demonstration of the kind of greatness and power that he possesses. This demonstration of greatness and power will be set in direct and profound contrast to the demonstrations of greatness and power exhibited and exercised by the rulers of this world.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 9.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10.<sup>33-34</sup>

Jesus *is* Messiah. He *is* King of Israel. But he is a very, very different *kind* of King.

### Of donkeys and horses

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I am not sure who first suggested that “a picture is worth a thousand words. Whether it came from an ancient Chinese composer of proverbs or a 19<sup>th</sup> century American advertising executive, we will put its assertion to the test in today’s homily. So, here are two pictures.



So, what thousand words do the two images conjure up in your mind? While you’re cogitating on that, here are a few fun facts that are still true, even in the bizarre post-truth era in which we now find ourselves living.

The standard Near Eastern donkey stands some 36 to 48 inches at the withers (where the neck meets the back) and weighs in at give or take 500 lbs. The standard riding horse weighs in at between 900 and 1200 pounds and stands some 56 to 68 inches at the withers—thoroughbred horses can be several inches taller.

So, which of the two animals is most impressive? With which would most people want most to be associated? With which would you want most to be associated? Which of the two animals do true heroes and kings mount and gallop the world over seeking fame and conquest?

Speaking of riders, let’s add a rider to the picture.



The head of one riding a donkey is somewhere around 65 to 78 inches above ground, making them at or just a little above eye level of someone standing on the ground next to the donkey and rider. The head of one riding a horse is roughly 87 to 100 inches off the ground, making them 20 to 40 inches above the eye level of someone standing on the ground next to the horse and rider.

Which rider will seem to possess the most impressive bearing to those standing about? To which rider will those standing about look up to most—both literally and figuratively?

No doubt, you can already guess where I am heading with all of this. Jesus, King of the Jews, or King of Kings choose to ride into the capital city mounted on a donkey rather than the more traditional, acceptable, expected, and impressive horse. Why? What does this tell us about Jesus? What does it tell us about his approach to leadership and kingship? What does it tell us about his kingdom?

Jesus' choice to ride into Jerusalem on the back of an ass, far more than an effort to fulfill prophecy about a given moment in time, was a conscious attempt to demonstrate the unique quality of his kingship, his greatness, and his power as foretold in scripture. By word and deed, Jesus has been teaching his disciples for months now that he was not the sort of Messiah that they were looking or hoping for. He was king. No doubt about that. But he wasn't anything even remotely like any other king. His kingdom was built on different principles than those of the kingdoms of this world. His was not a greatness and power like any they had ever witnessed.

Likely, you have watched a Hollywood portrayal of a king or conquering hero entering a city surrounding with adoring crowds as part of a coronation ceremony, a celebration of battle and war victories, or some other important national event. Such portrayals are not wholly fictional. They are often based on what we know of real historical events and customs.

Kings and conquerors rode into town on the most impressive ride they could find: rides that impressed and sent messages of greatness and power—and, usually, intimidation (today, we have traded chariots and horses for limousines, black Cadillac escalades, and black hawk helicopters: I am still waiting for a U.S. president to come visiting in a Toyota Corolla.).

Think about the message being sent when the king or conqueror rides into town on this.





Just look at those muscular legs, those muscular flanks, that muscular neck. Look into those eyes, wild with excitement. Look at those flaring nostrils, impatient for action, that erect tail, anticipating feats of bravery. See and hear the impatient prancing, the clop, clop, clopping of large powerful hoofs anxious to trample any and every foe. But as you look and admire the greatness and power of it all, O celebrant, be sure that you do not get too close lest you become the next victim of the muscles, the impatience, the anticipation, and the intimidation.

And what does it say about the man on the horse? How powerful he is! How comfortably he commands the horse—expensive as well as powerful! Now this... this is a leader. Surely, we can trust our security our safety our fortune, our happiness to such a man as this! No doubt, he can control and master our enemies just as he controls and masters the horse.

John the Revelator, so dense throughout Jesus' ministry, finally "got it." And so, when we consider Jesus' slow gait into Jerusalem on the back of an ass, we think of John's contrasting portrayal of the kings of this world. They, he sees, sit as it were on "a white horse." They go "forth conquering, and to conquer." But they succeed in nothing but taking "peace from the earth" and "kill[ing] one another" until "Death, and Hell" have devoured huge swaths of humanity, such that the dead cannot be buried before the "beast of the earth" fed on their rotting flesh.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe this sort of king isn't all its cracked up to be after all. Maybe, rather, this... this is the sort of king we want.



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<sup>4</sup> See Revelation 6.<sup>1-8</sup>

No muscle car, this! This mount does not speak of intimidation, of impatience, of controlling domination, of danger. There is no fear of being trampled, of being victimized. No walking on eggshells with this rider. No need to strain the neck to look up into an entitled, privileged face filled with hubris. No, we walk secure alongside him. We stand at eye level with the rider. We look into his face and he meets our gaze as equals, this man of meekness and lowliness of heart.

What kind of king will he be? He will be the sort of king that draws sincere praise from the lips of his fellow citizens.

“Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord;  
Hosanna in the highest.”

Yes, Jesus’ greatness and power is immense. But it is very, very different than what we are accustomed to. It is long past time that we ceased looking for a king like unto all the nations and sought a king unlike any who have come before.

#### Conclusion and benediction

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Today’s homily has been a bit unusual as we have relied as much on images as on rhetoric. Nevertheless, we hope we have provided the reader insight into how radically different Jesus’ greatness and power is from that of the rulers of this world. This, we believe, was Jesus’ point in choosing to enter Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. It was but one more moment, among the many we have and will examine in this series of homilies, in which Jesus sought to explicate the true nature of his greatness and power and the sort of kingdom into which he was inviting his disciples and all those who would hear tell of him through them.

In reporting this “object lesson”—truly an act of resistance to this world’s perverted perspective on greatness, power, and leadership—the Gospel writer calls upon the words of

the Hebrew prophet, Zachariah: “Tell ye the daughter of Sion, ‘Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.’”

This quote serves to do far, far more than provide a kind of apologetic proof-text to justify Jesus’ claims. Rather, it serves to show that in all ages there were inspired individuals who could see through the royal/political propaganda of false greatness and power. They came to understand that God and those who love and follow him did not possess greatness or exercise power based upon this perverted propaganda. They saw that true greatness and real power was seen in humble, servant-like leadership and discipleship that sought to comfort and strengthen others rather than intimidate and weaken them. In quoting Zachariah’s prophetic insight, the Gospel writer was giving evidence of this long held insight, and that One had come who measure up to the age-old hope. Little wonder that those so privileged as to see the long-awaited hope cried out,

“Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord;  
Hosanna in the highest.”

We know that their words spoke more and a greater truth than they knew. It is likely this two-thousand-year-old Hosanna shout still contains more and greater truth than we appreciate. Certainly, it contains more and greater truth than we live, for we continue to labor and toil and suffer under the old and satanic regiments of false greatness and counterfeit power.

*The king will then endure as the sun and moon  
for endless generations.  
He will be like rain falling upon the fields;  
a soaking rain upon the ground.  
In that day, those who act justly will flower,  
and peace will increase as long as the moon endures...*

*Because he comes to the rescue of the destitute who are screaming for help,  
as well as the downtrodden and those who have no other source of succor;  
because he shows compassion for the powerless and impoverished;  
brings deliverance into the life of the destitute;  
because he defends them from violent exploitation;  
views their lives as invaluable;  
He will live long,  
and have presented to him gold from Šēbā'.  
Prayers will be offered continuously on his behalf;  
the entire nation praise him...*

*His fame will endure forever;  
his renown come up as often as the sun.  
Every nation will be blessed through him;  
esteem him a bearer of happiness.  
Praised be Yahweh ʾēlohîm, Yiśrāʾēl's God,  
who alone acts wondrously.  
Extolled be his august character, forever;  
the whole earth filled with his grandeur.  
ʾĀmēn and ʾāmēn.”<sup>5</sup>*

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 72.<sup>5-7, 12-15, 17-19</sup>; author's translation

<sup>i</sup> Following is a breakdown of Jesus' traditional miracles along with their distribution throughout the Gospels. Because John seems to possess an agenda even more radically different than even the very different agendas of the three synoptic Gospels, I have and will focus only on those three synoptic Gospels in my analysis.

Miracle	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Water turned to wine				2. <sup>1-11</sup>
Nobleman's son healed				4. <sup>46-54</sup>
Draught of fish			5. <sup>4-11</sup>	
Man with unclean spirit healed		1. <sup>21-27</sup>	4. <sup>31-36</sup>	
Peter's mother-in-law healed	8. <sup>14-15</sup>	1. <sup>30-31</sup>	4. <sup>38-39</sup>	
A multitude of sick healed	8. <sup>16</sup>	1. <sup>32-34</sup>	4. <sup>40-41</sup>	
Leper healed	8. <sup>2-4</sup>	1. <sup>40-42</sup>	5. <sup>12-13</sup>	
Palsied man healed	9. <sup>2-7</sup>	2. <sup>3-12</sup>	5. <sup>18-25</sup>	
Crippled man healed at Bethesda				5. <sup>1-9</sup>
Man with withered hand healed	12. <sup>10-13</sup>	3. <sup>1-5</sup>	6. <sup>6-10</sup>	
Centurion's son healed	8. <sup>5-13</sup>		7. <sup>1-10</sup>	
Nain widow's son raised from dead			7. <sup>11-15</sup>	
Calming the storm at sea	8. <sup>23-27</sup>	4. <sup>37-41</sup>	8. <sup>22-25</sup>	
Man with legions healed	8. <sup>28-34</sup>	5. <sup>1-15</sup>	8. <sup>27-39</sup>	
Woman with issue of blood healed	9. <sup>20-22</sup>	5. <sup>25-29</sup>	8. <sup>43-48</sup>	
Jarius' daughter raised from dead	9. <sup>18-19, 23-25</sup>	5. <sup>22-24, 38-42</sup>	8. <sup>41-42, 49-56</sup>	
Two blind men healed	9. <sup>27-31</sup>			
A possessed mute man healed	9. <sup>32-33</sup>			
Man with "devil," blind & dumb healed	12. <sup>22</sup>		11. <sup>14</sup>	
Feeding of 5,000	14. <sup>15-21</sup>	6. <sup>35-44</sup>	9. <sup>12-17</sup>	6. <sup>6-13</sup>
Jesus walks on water	14. <sup>25</sup>	6. <sup>48-51</sup>		6. <sup>19-20</sup>
Multitudes healed in Gennesaret	14. <sup>34-36</sup>	6. <sup>53-56</sup>		
Syrophenician woman's daughter healed	15. <sup>21-28</sup>	7. <sup>24-30</sup>		
Many, including deaf & dumb healed	15. <sup>29-31</sup>	7. <sup>31-37</sup>		
Feeding of 4,000	15. <sup>32-38</sup>	8. <sup>1-9</sup>		
Blind healed at Bethsaida		8. <sup>22-26</sup>		
<b>Peter's confession</b>	<b>16.<sup>13-20</sup></b>	<b>8.<sup>27-30</sup></b>	<b>9.<sup>18-21</sup></b>	

Demonic son healed	17. <sup>14-18</sup>	9. <sup>17-29</sup>	9. <sup>38-43</sup>	
Coin taken from fish	17. <sup>24-27</sup>			
Man born blind healed			11. <sup>14</sup>	9. <sup>1-7</sup>
Crippled woman healed			13. <sup>10-17</sup>	
Man with dropsy healed			14. <sup>1-4</sup>	
Lazarus raised from dead				11. <sup>1-44</sup>
Ten lepers healed			17. <sup>11-19</sup>	
Two blind (Bartimaeus) healed	20. <sup>29-34</sup>	10. <sup>46-52</sup>	18. <sup>35-43</sup>	
Fig tree cursed and withered	21. <sup>18-22</sup>	11. <sup>12-14, 20-25</sup>		
Soldier's severed ear healed			22. <sup>50-51</sup>	
	19/4 (23/83% before)	17/3 (20/85% before)	15/7 (22/68% before)	5/2 (7/71% before)
Synoptic 23/9 (31 total /74% before)				