



REFLECTIONS

HOLY WEEK

2025





Foreward

Welcome to SJSM's Holy Week
Reflections 2025.

Based thematically on
Matthew's Gospel, here are
8 original reflections that mirror
the 8 days from Palm Sunday to
Easter Sunday. May it be your
prayerful companion
throughout this period.

Warmly & blessings
Andrew Ponniah

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SJSM Christian Education
SJSM • April 2025



Palm Sunday • 13 April 2025

Reflection 1: Matthew 21:1-11

Do you want a War Horse or a Royal Donkey?

Jesus enters the final week of his earthly life. Scripture will surround, strengthen and guard him. He will submit to his Father and face the Cross humbly.

Jesus begins the entry to Jerusalem by sending two of his disciples to collect a donkey and colt from the village ahead because 'he needs them' (vs 3). He is at Bethghe near the Mount of Olives.

People usually walk to Jerusalem during the festivals. Jesus walked everywhere else. Why make a show of it by riding a colt now? He is publicly claiming to be of David's line and therefore a King. The moment is saturated with prophecy and history and the heavenly hosts watching. It is sacred and carries through to the whole week.

Zechariah 9:9, in about 6 BC, says 'Your king is coming, mounted on a

donkey...' quoted by Matthew here in vs 5 again points to Jesus' entry as foretold and fulfilling Scripture.

Mount Moriah in Genesis then and Jerusalem now resonate. They are one and the same place. The giving of Isaac and the giving of Jesus are contrasted symbolically. What common animal did they (Abraham and Jesus) travel on - a donkey. Jesus according to Matthew, rode on the colt never ridden, a 3 to 4 year old. The mother comes along so it is psychologically assured and calm.

Donkeys (stable, loyal and able to sense danger) are well regarded throughout the Bible (cf Balaam's donkey). Genesis 22, where Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac but a ram instead is offered, happened at Mount Moriah. Jerusalem, where he enters now, is situated on a hill close to or at Mount Moriah. Can you see the parallel?

At the very same place about 35 centuries ago, God set a pattern where He will one day (Passover) sacrifice his own Son and save the world and the people he dearly loves. The drama is the same but this time Jesus' own blood is shed.

Jews in Jerusalem, on the side of scribes and Pharisees, caught in the echo chambers of their own prejudices, contributed to the 'uprising and stirring' (vs 10) on account of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. Who does he think he is? Why this fuss? Why do we allow him to disrupt our ritual worship?

Luke 19: 41-43 lends further support and a wider angle because it tells us that it's the people who are on trial and not Jesus. They do not recognise the visitation of God, are totally ignorant of their sin and see themselves as absolved of blame and guilt. Jesus therefore weeps. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

Hosanna's 'save now' or 'save us we pray' may be indicative of their urgent need for political salvation and not spiritual salvation.

His second coming promises complete salvation but his entry now into Jerusalem offers spiritual salvation. Without the shedding of blood, there is no salvation.

Jesus obeyed the Father to the end. The entry to Jerusalem ends within days at Calvary where death and emptiness are finally met head-on and thankfully conquered! This needs to be etched into our memories and consciousness. Otherwise, Holy Week is just another Christian religious event where we pity Jesus for dying on the Cross.

The end of the passage reveals Jesus as the folk hero of Galilee par excellence. Hailed as the prophet from Nazareth by his followers, known as the great healer, teacher and progressively as the One who saves, he is truly blessed.

The crowd wanted a political victor on a war horse. But Jesus comes as a humble King to die and win salvation, riding on a meek colt. The colt (young donkey) is stable, loyal and kind. Mull on this thought.



Monday of Holy Week • 14 April 2025

Reflection 2: Matthew 21:12-17

The Whip or a Repentant Heart

Jesus is passionate about his Father's house. Have you been passionate about any cause besides yourself?

In this epic encounter, Jesus says this is his Father's house and it is by definition a house of prayer. To make it commercial and money-making is contrived, obtuse and fundamentally wrong.

This is the second temple first initiated after Exile and now rebuilt and expanded by Herod (the first temple built by Solomon was destroyed in 587 BC by the Babylonians). Comprising the outer area and the inner area which housed the ark of the covenant in the innermost part of the temple, this temple was lavish (Herod took pride in his buildings though he was not a believer). We are here looking at the outer temple where non-Jews wanting to worship Yahweh and make sacrifices could do so. In this area,

the temple priests, converted to a den of robbers (Jeremiah 7:11). Two further points. They had to use temple currency and so change money. Next, they had to use proper priest-certified sacrifices as the ones they brought were deemed not good enough. Another area where trade proliferated.

Jesus made the whip (John 2:15). He cleared the temple of traders and money-dealing. He upturned the tables. Righteous anger.

Scribes and Pharisees question: By what authority? (vs 15). This reveals their thoughts on the identity of Jesus that he was just a man and all his claims that he is the Messiah, the One who cures the sick and disabled and miracles are dismissed.

The innocent children know he is Lord and are at home with him. The sick are cured. His miracles are

beyond imagination – the calming of the storm, and the raising of Jarius's daughter and Lazarus among many. Hosanna! To the Son of David.

What other visible proof do they need? He retires to Bethany, 2 miles from Jerusalem and his safe house with friends, companions and his disciples. At issue: where does Jesus derive his authority from? It has tailed him since he started his ministry 3 years ago. The scribes and Pharisees won't believe him because their prejudice is premised on self-love and self-conceit and will not accept evidence even if it is, as in this instance, staring them in the face.

Where do you stand? With the scribes and Pharisees in their cynicism and disbelief? Or with the crowd of believers who have followed him? That is the question. Pray for your doubts. Be honest.

They were 'indignant' (vs 15). How could he, a mere man, receive accolades from children and gratitude from the healed? If you deny the divinity of our Lord, this is how you think.

Impossible was their reaction. Jesus knew that unbelief was the

root cause. He retired and rested at Bethany. How else do you fight a wall of rigid indifference?

Matthew is unique in his writing in that he compresses narratives and teachings so that he can cover more ground. The most Jewish of all the Gospel writings, he places Jesus in full flow of Old Testament symbolism and prophecies. There is no doubt. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed One. He has come to bring freedom to the oppressed and salvation to the world.

I work because my Father works (John 5:17). Jesus focuses on the work on hand and not on his imminent death though it is just days away. His heart goes out to the sick, lame and blind. His compassion knows no boundaries. If people put their trust in him and have faith the size of a mustard seed, they will be healed. Remarkable!

Thank the Lord for saving you and cleansing you with his blood. Pray for someone you know prone to disbelief that the foggy mind and rebellion of the heart will melt. Replaced with a child-like faith.



Tuesday of Holy Week • 15 April 2025

Reflection 3: Matthew 21:23-46

Why obey Jesus? What authority does he have over my life?

Obedience is our natural and rightful posture. Sin has corrupted it so we rebel overtly and covertly.

Do we pay heed to God's authority in our lives? Do we really listen? In everyday affairs? In life-determining situations? In choosing a life partner? A job? In considering ministry in the local church and getting involved?

If we ask the worldly man the same questions above, the answer is clear. He will not stop to inquire of God. What relevance does Jesus have in my life besides guilt-tripping me...so we think. Who needs another layer of complexity?

So the scribes and chief priests here are probing Jesus: And who gave you this authority? It's a question of: Why we should obey you? Who are you that commands our obedience? Answer: He is the Lord God. We are tied to him for

nourishment and life. We are dependents.

Jesus turns the question back to them. John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from men? The religious elite are trapped. They didn't believe John but they are self-interested people and care what people think of them. These people consider John the Baptist a prophet. The scribes don't want to go there. 'We don't know' (vs 27) they reply Jesus – the safe non-committal answer that is the refrain of this world for centuries that has witnessed the killing of millions, starvation, child abuse and violence.

The actual situation was that the Pharisees and religious folk did not want John's baptism but the tax collectors and prostitutes accepted the invitation and joined the queue to heaven. Israel right

from the Old Testament was told to look after the marginalised.

This leads to the parable of the two sons with ironic twists. The son who says 'Yes' to working in the vineyard does not go (can you see the religious pious folk here?) whereas the son who said 'No' eventually works in the vineyard (alluding to the tax collectors and prostitutes).

Then the parable of the tenants tells in no uncertain terms the evil that lurks in the minds and hearts of the scribes and Pharisees and the judgement and death that finally befall them as the owner of the vineyard who have lost his servants and son. There will be a day of reckoning. The Pharisees understood this perfectly – would they repent or continue their cruel path and plot Jesus' murder? The choice is real. It is not a done deal, not a *fait accompli*. They are not destined to do evil. They choose to do evil.

Jesus has the final quip: The rejected stone has become the cornerstone. He is speaking of himself. Why should we obey him? Because he is Lord over our lives and the Universe. In him lies our true path without which we are restless and aimless.

Don't we want our discordant lives changed to ordered lives? He is the true and valid authority in our lives.

Therefore the kingdom of God will be taken away from the scribes and Pharisees and given to a people producing fruit.

Read verse 44 again:

'And the one on who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him'.

Turn off your screens. Open your eyes and come away to Calvary and find God.



Wednesday • 16 April 2025

Reflection 4: Matthew 24:1-36

These Things Must Happen

Jesus is now the Temple. We do not need the reliance on the physical temple as it leads to past ritual worship. St Paul calls our bodies the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Now, Jesus and his disciples are on the Mount of Olives overlooking the beauty and structure of the Temple and a conversation ensues in this Olivet discourse.

What will happen to the Temple?
How will the end be?

The Seleucid King Antiochus IV in 167 BC desecrated the temple. The abomination of desolation is in prophetic duality. It will come again in the future and mark the reign of the Antichrist and his demise.

The Romans destroyed the Temple that Josephus the Jewish historian described as 'the most marvellous edifice which we have seen or heard of, whether one considers its structure, its magnitude, the richness of its very detail'. Herod-

built magnificence but all that remained of it after AD 70 when the Romans razed it to the ground (after the Jews rebelled) were some foundation stones or the Western Wall. This was what Jesus was referring to as 'there will not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down' (vs 2). Here, fervent Jews and Muslims still visit today, pray and lament for the physical building.

The second question in the Olivet Discourse was: What will be the signs of your coming again and the end of the age?

A number of things must happen:

- There will be false Christs and prophets
- Conflicts widespread
- Famines and earthquakes
- Lawlessness (every man for himself)
- Persecution of Christians (many will fall by the wayside)
- Love will grow very cold

Our age meets the criteria above but not the one below.

The one very significant sign is from verse 14 – the gospel will be proclaimed to the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come.

Christians are to share Christ and make disciples of every nation. We are not to waste time decoding the Bible. We are to obey our Lord's teaching here in Matthew.

What of the fig tree as the summary metaphor to recognise the times and seasons? The fig tree has always stood symbolically for the Jewish nation but in Luke 21 referring to the same passage, Luke adds the fig tree and all other trees including all nations too.

In the midst of all that is dismal in chapter 24, a glimmer of hope, summer, is near when the fig tree 'puts out its leaves' (vs 32-35). Jesus is at the very gate. There is hope eternal! He will spare us the worst of the tribulation and all of us will converge in him who's the sustainer of the world and our very lives.

But verse 36 has the last word: 'But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, not the Son, but the Father only'.

'Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes' (vs 45-46).



Interlude

Matthew 26-28

We slow down here. We have to. The Creator and Saviour of this world must undergo the Passion, the shame of the Cross and then the triumphant Resurrection. We bow our heads with leaping joy in our hearts.

Gradually, we see the drama unfold and Jesus becomes increasingly silent. He hands over his life to evil and endures the pain to find resurrection joy. One remembers the Christ-figure Aslan in the

Chronicles of Narnia and how he surrenders his life to the wicked witch and her evil band. With glee, they tie Aslan in a horrible ritual and kill him. Short-lived. Resurrection power is stronger. Aslan rises from the dead.

At the margins of our life where the battle intensifies, it's so good to take in the fact that the One who has gone before knows the travail and has overcome it completely. So can we.



Maundy Thursday • 17 April 2025

Reflection 5: Matthew 26:17-25

The Lord's Supper - The Betrayal and the New Covenant

'A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth'. John 4:23

In a digital and compartmentalised age, we tend to see these two events as separate and distinct – the betrayal by Judas and the institution of the Lord's Supper. But in Matthew's gospel and the other 3 gospel accounts, they are shown as interspersed and flow in together. In fact, they are inseparable. Why? Because the Lord's Supper knows we are sinners and have a dire need for symbols that reflect the truth and reality of Christ's death. Judas' betrayal is tragic, real and happened in a historic time. Christ's death is love, real for all time and happened in time and space.

It parallels the Passover in Exodus in terms of sacrifice and redemption. There too, sin was

crouching in Pharaoh and his hardness and cruelty. Now, as then, but fuller and more complete in human flesh and blood, Jesus enacts the New Covenant. So paving the path for his covenant people on the road to redemption. The bread reminding us of his body, wrapped in pain and suffering; the wine signifying the new, rich covenant of salvation between God and humankind that is drenched in royalty, forgiveness and acceptance.

And so four verbs stand out: *took, blessed, broke and gave*. This is the Sacrament's profoundly simple enactment – it is not meant to be complicated and incomprehensible. People all over the world can participate. The Lord's table is open for all eternity to those who believe that Jesus is Lord. There is nothing superstitious here. Sincere, humble belief is what is needed.

As John Harris says: "It is not the bread which is blessed, but God. Jesus used the traditional Jewish benediction: Blessed are you O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."

Then took, broke and gave. We are cognisant that Christ's body was badly bruised, flayed and pierced for us. And so God's love prevails in that his new body and life are given to us.

We meet the Risen Christ around the Communion table. It is more than a mental remembrance. It is the token of God's present

presence with us and a foretaste of what we are to become as we reverently partake of His body and His blood in a divine mystery. Jesus is the still centre.

His promise: 'I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom' (vs 29).

What does the New Covenant mean to you? Does it signify a forsaking of sin and worldliness and the taking on of the rich and humble mantle of the Risen Saviour? Pray that this be true of yourself.



Good Friday • 18 April 2025

Reflection 6: Matthew 27:32-50

Jesus Suffered and Died

**Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held him there
Until it was accomplished**

Stuart Townsend

We are very familiar with Jesus dying for our sins as a one-time event. We need to reflect and learn that before he died, he bled and suffered agonisingly too. Not just physical torment but abandonment and the whole complex of emotions that cry loneliness and sorrow. The crucifixion started with the flogging, beating and scourging. Then when beaten to a pulp they start the crucifixion process proper which would end in death. It's the total demolition of a person who dares defy the Roman authorities. You are brought to nothing and everything spells it.

While we may have certain misgivings about Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), he is

spot on in portraying the brutality of the suffering. Isaiah 53 unpacks this:

He was despised and
rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and
familiar with suffering
Like one from whom
men hide their faces
he was despised and
we esteemed him not...
he was pierced for our
transgressions,
he was crushed for our
iniquities...

(vs 3 and 5a)

Where would you be in the scene?
With Roman onlookers? The Roman
soldiers?

The centurion? The guilty Jewish
religious elite? The fellow-
condemned? The distant but
faithful women followers of Jesus?

Or the scoffers. 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself...' (vs 40).

Matthew takes on the eyes of the spectator to retain objectivity and give us a stereoscopic view. Only the Romans could pronounce the verdict of death, the Jewish authorities could not. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent but fell prey to the crowd and needed to satisfy them to win popularity. A kangaroo court sent Jesus to the Cross.

The Gospels of Luke and John contain 6 of the 7 words from the Cross. Matthew (and Mark) contain one only – "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*". The pain of the forsaken in Aramaic – the language of Jesus' hometown Nazareth. And that's the only thing that Matthew records because he

wants us to know the door is slammed shut by the Jewish people, the people he came as Messiah. It's total rejection. And God the Father is mysteriously quiet too (though very active in the background).

And ironic that it's a visitor to Jerusalem, an African Gentile who is Simon of Cyrene who is forced to carry the Cross. It made a definite impact on him as he presumably became a believer, mentioned by Mark and Luke in the book of Acts where he is called 'Simon of Niger'.

Verse 50 ends this part with the poignant words that Jesus gave up his spirit.

Jesus not only died for me but suffered for me.



Preparation Saturday • 19 April 2025

Reflection 7: Matthew 27:51-61

The Curtain Torn and 3 Affected People

Were you there?

The pace does not let up. Jesus dies and immediately the heavy curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom. God provides unprecedented access to Himself. The sun went down at noon. People came back from the dead, and the 'tombs broke open' (vs 52) at the resurrection (on Easter Sunday).

Also, the Jewish audience would know unequivocally what Matthew is saying: Jesus is the long prophesied Suffering Servant, the Davidic King they have been waiting for since the post-exilic period.

The first group changed, who experienced 'good trauma', was the centurion and those with him guarding. They were terrified and exclaimed wholeheartedly 'Surely he was the Son of God!' (vs 54)

The second group changed, in the sense saddened, were the women

who cared for his needs. They had not abandoned Jesus as their male counterparts, his disciples had. In that torrid situation, they surely would have been recognised as Jesus' disciples. Ordinarily, they (the disciples) should have claimed their master's body but fear overcame them and they deserted him. The women, however, watched from a distance.

So it was left to Joseph of Arimathea, a Sanhedrin member, who opposed Jesus' execution (Luke 23: 50, 51) and was a disciple of Jesus. It is he who asked Pilate for Jesus' body. It is he who is bold, honest and God-fearing. After he completes the procedures, he rolls a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and goes away leaving two women from earlier to stay the vigil – Mary Magdalene and Mary of Clopas, the mother of James and Joses.

The faithful, dutiful women who sensed (however little) that this is not the anti-climax end to Jesus' exciting ministry. *This could not be.*

Remember the old hymn. *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?* Listen to the reverential humming of this classic African-American spiritual song.

Jesus touched the lives of three groups of people – enemies, followers and strangers just going about their routines. They are all invited to a place of faith in Jesus.





Easter Sunday • 20 April 2025

Reflection 8: Matthew 28:1-10

Newness - On the First Day of the Week

If God is dead, somebody is going to have to take his place. It will be megalomania or erotomania, the drive for power or the drive for pleasure...Hitler or Hugh Hefner. Malcolm Muggeridge

Guards are posted at the tomb of Jesus to prevent his disciples from stealing it and claiming resurrection. The two women – the Marys, there on Preparation Saturday, are back in the morning after, to give Jesus a proper burial with spices. They are there after the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week. A new beginning awaits them and us! In the Resurrection, God alone is the actor.

An angel, his appearance like lightning, rolls back the stone and gently tells them 'He is not here, he has risen' (vs 6). The guards are terrified and dumbstruck. The women are overjoyed and given the message to let the disciples know and meet in Galilee.

Why Galilee? An outpost. Where those who couldn't make the grade in Jerusalem, went to. But where Jesus grew up and made his home. His family and friends were there.

For us in the 21st century, it's the area where the commonplaces in our life intersect – the nursery, school, church, neighbourhood where the dirty, messy spots are. Family fights, misunderstandings and ruptured relationships occupy this space. It's where Jesus chooses to meet us and give us new life.

Then Jesus suddenly met the Marys. They clasped his feet and worshipped him. His words to them: Do not be afraid...go to Galilee, there they will see me. Already newness seeping through.

Make no doubt about it. This moment or this passage belongs to the women. They outshine the men in terms of obedience, humility and loyalty. Their vigil of

prayer and quiet desperation is rewarded. Their constancy of belief in the onslaught of faith and their need to touch, feel, see and hear the Lord set benchmarks for us to follow.

So we come to the end of this 8-day Holy Week reflection.

Wherever you're at and whatever position you hold, pray that you be blessed in SJSJ for the year ahead and are challenged by these studies in Matthew.

May you be moved on the first day of every day to trust and be firm in your resolve for the Lord.

In the end, coming to faith remains for all a sense of homecoming, of picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that had long been ringing, of taking a place at a table that had long been vacant. Malcolm Muggeridge

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