

# Hail, king of the Jews

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[0:00] Hello and welcome to our evening service for the 4th of October.

! My name is Steve Ellacott. I'm one of the deacons of our church. If you've not come across us before, we are Calvary Church on the south coast in Brighton and we meet together to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and to worship the Father.

In our studies and in the evening services we've been working through the book of Matthew and we've now come to the events around the crucifixion.

Matthew wants to present to us Jesus as the King and tell us about his kingdom and we'll be looking into one aspect of this in our study in a few minutes.

So we now turn to the King and that kingdom and we sing of him in the song Across the Lands.

You're the one of God the Father, from before the war began.

[1:23] Every star and every planet has been fashioned by your hands. All creation holds together by the power of your voice.

Let the skies declare your glory and the land of sin rejoice. You're the one of God the Lord of creation.

You're the Lord of every man. And your cry of love rings out the crystal night. That you left the gates of angels.

Here to sing and save the Lord. And exchange the joy of heaven. On the anguish of the cross.

With a prayer you've left the hungry. With a world you still the sea. In how silently you suffer.

[2:32] Let the guilty make a fear. You're the one of God the nation.

You're the Lord of every man.

And your cry of love rings out the crystal night. With a shout you rise victorious.

Wrestling victory, fall and pray. And the sand they lead to heaven. Leaning captives in your way.

How you stand before the matter. You're the one of God the Lord of every man. You're the one of God the Lord of every man. And your cry of love rings out the crystal night.

You're the one of God the Lord of every man. You're the one of God the Lord of every man. And your cry of love rings out the crystal night.

[3:37] You're the one of God of creation. You're the one of God the Lord of every man. And your cry of love rings out the crystal night.

Now let us come before God in prayer. Our Father in heaven, we come to you to thank you that you are the Holy One. Although men and women do not acknowledge that.

We pray that your will may be done on earth. Although people seem determined to reject your rule and your king. Saying we will not have Jesus reign over us.

As the months of this pandemic drag on, we are forced to acknowledge that all our plans and schemes of men are subject to your sovereignty. And so we will pray for mercy and so cease.

We pray for all those who are fighting this disease and its resulting chaos in various ways. We pray that you will bless their efforts with success. We pray for governments that seem set on the folly of sin.

[4:44] That they may nonetheless receive mercy and wisdom to lead the nations back to health. And we pray especially for all those who are suffering in many different ways at this time.

Lord God, may they find relief and solace in you. Father, now we come to you as your people. We confess that we have not done the things we should have done.

We've done the things we shouldn't have done. And we have thought the wrong things and we have said the wrong things. And yet we do come wanting to worship you. Wanting our hearts to be turned to you.

And we pray that as we meet together now, we may learn things from your word. And that we may rejoice in the Lord. May each of us be found praising you for the gift of your son, whose message of love indeed rings out across the lands.

We ask these things in the name of that King, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. Now we're thinking about Jesus as the King.

[5:49] And there's a passage of Psalm in the Old Testament that tells us about the King, the King anointed by God. It's Psalm 2. And I'm going to read that now.

Psalm 2. In the New International Version. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Let us break their chains, they say, and throw off their fetters. The one enthroned in heaven laughs and the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.

I will proclaim the decree of the Lord. He said to me, you are my son. Today I have become your father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

You will rule them with an iron scepter. You will dash them to pieces like pottery. Therefore, you kings, be wise. Be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

[7:09] Kiss the son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way. For his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Now, before we turn to our study, we'll sing that psalm together. In a version of the words should appear on the screen. Why do the heaven rage?

Why does the world come spire? The rulers fought against the Lord and his red son.

Come, let us break their bonds and throw their fetters off. The Lord and throne run high looks down to laugh and scorn.

In anger he rebukes his wrath with terror fills. I have instilled my king inside my holy hill.

[8:46] I'll tell the Lord, sit free to be his chosen one. I have forgotten you today. You are my son.

The Lord and throne. And all the nations in this world you are the end.

With eye and centre rule in every land holds swayed. The nations you will break apart like thoughts of claim.

Let all you kings be wise and serve the Lord with fear. And trembling joy whose anger lies forever near.

Now kiss the sun, bless thee, destroy you in your sin. God bless our all, eternally, eternally.

[10:16] Amen. So our passage for study this evening is quite short. It's Matthew 27 verses 27 to 31.

I also want to draw your attention to a couple of verses that come later in the narrative. So let me read from Matthew's Gospel. Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him.

They stripped him and put on a scarlet robe on him and then wove a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him.

Hail, King of the Jews, they said. They spat on him and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify them. And then in verse 37 we read, Above his head they placed the written charge against him.

[11:21] This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. And again in verse 54 of Matthew 27 we read, When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, Surely he was the Son of God.

So now let us turn attention to this brief passage in Matthew. Of course, you can't have a king without a coronation. And that is exactly what is being staged here.

Actually, the trappings of coronation have not changed much in over 2,000 years. We have features that we still recognize today. If the Jews would not give their king a coronation, and then the Romans must do it.

But of course this whole thing is a mockery, a charade, a travesty, a pantomime. But there are subtle interleaved layers of irony here. In order to unpick these, we need to understand the symbolism of coronation.

So let us look first at what this is on the surface, a coronation enacted for the Messianic king. Once we have a grip on this, we can understand the attitudes and ironies going on here, and hence what they say to us about our rebellious hearts.

[12:43] So to map out where we're going, we'll look at these things. First, we'll look at the coronation. And then we'll explore three ironies that are going on here, three things going on on the surface and below the surface.

And then we can understand what God has to say to us about these things. We read Psalm 2, and Psalm 2 is a psalm about the coronation.

The coronation of the Messianic king, and in fact it sheds light on this whole procedure. Let us look at some of the features of a coronation that we have here. First of all, we have an honour guard. The whole company, perhaps 600 soldiers, are called out. A king must have a military escort. These soldiers were probably auxiliaries, not Roman legionnaires.

They would have been recruited from the surrounding territory, with no loyalty to a Jewish king. In fact, they were probably jealous of the special protections that the Jewish religion had under Roman law.

[13:50] The Jewish fanatics, who denounced their neighbours as Gentile dogs, have been nevertheless allowed to build a glorious temple. And yet the whole city and nation was a hotbed of intrigue and sedition.

This was a posting no soldier would relish to that seditious city. These forces, indeed, 40 years later, would destroy the city.

But they were already at work. Do these soldiers want to honour the king? Not likely. And yet we find some, at least, later, would have occasion to change their mind.

And we have a royal robe. An emperor must wear royal purple. Matthew describes the robe as scarlet. John and Mark describe it as purple.

This was an age of natural dyes, and intense colours were very difficult to produce. Purple, in particular, was prized and very valuable.

[14:55] A purple robe symbolises the glory and wealth of the kingdom, an expensive garment for an important occasion. Any craftsman or woman chosen to produce a royal robe would be deeply honoured.

Only the best work by the best designers and artisans would do. But this is a borrowed robe.

Perhaps a Roman soldier's cape. This kingdom is a little short on worldly wealth and glory.

There's none of the glory and extravagance of Solomon's reign here. Nothing of the wealth of the Roman nobility and emperor either. In fact, this robe is the colour of blood about to be shed.

Now, obviously, you can't have a coronation without a crown. And so the soldiers plaited a crown of thorns. Read this in verse 29. The thorns were probably long and sticking upward like the spikes often found on a traditional crown.

The crown is the sign of an anointed head of state. The oil of anointing washes off, but the crown is the permanent symbol. It reminds everyone who sees it that the wearer is not a private individual, but one who has sovereign authority.

[16:11] Crowns, we know, are notoriously uncomfortable. They're heavy in more senses than one. As Shakespeare put it, uneasy is the head that wears a crown.

This crown was particularly uncomfortable and points to the suffering of the king for his people. This crown was not made of the traditional gold, so it won't last long.

But no matter, the king will be dead in a few hours anyway. And yet even a king of purest gold would decay to dust before this king's reign will come to an end.

And then we have the affirmation of the ruler. Hail, king of the Jews! By that wrecks, long live the king! Only this king was about to be executed.

Hail, king of nothing! Long live the one about to die! Like the poster that Pilate put on the cross, this greeting was a deliberate jab at Jewish pretension.

[17:18] Power was found in Rome, not in David's Jerusalem. Anyway, the Jews themselves seem to want their king dead. But if the Jews would not affirm their ruler, cynical Roman soldiers must do it in mockery.

As Jesus has said, if necessary, even the very stones of the city would cry out. And then we have the kiss and kneel in homage, verse 30, reminding us again of Psalm 2.

Kiss the son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way. His wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. When a king was crowned in the ancient world, the subjects would kiss him, probably on the hand.

But here we have spitting instead of kissing. And yet no outpouring of wrath results, it appears. This king remains quiet. For now, but not forever.

Then finally, we have the staff or scepter. The royal scepter is a rod or a stick, a staff, and it's a symbol of royal power and authority.

[18:34] Again, Psalm 2.9 says of the Messianic king and the surrounding nations, you will rule them with an iron scepter. You will dash them to pieces like pottery. But here the soldiers of the surrounding nation use the scepter to strike the king, verse 30.

And the other Gospels tell us that this staff is made of a reed. You can't smash anything with a reed. And yet the scepter is there. The authority is there for anyone who can really see it.

And so with the scepter, the coronation is complete. This is a coronation. What does we know it? Let's just dive into some of the interleaved ironies that we find here.

What are the political attitudes of the participants in this drama? Where are they in their heads and hearts? And what does Matthew want us to understand?

So here is the first irony. The nations laugh. According to Psalm 2, the king should be enthroned in Zion and the nations submit to Jewish rule.

[19:40] But the Jews refuse to accept their own king. And so the nations stage this pantomime. Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles will bow to this king.

Not in truth, only in pantomime. And yet the king is crowned. And they do kneel before him, as Matthew has been careful to tell us.

But what do we make of the intentional mockery by the soldiers themselves? Actually, this is aimed not so much at Jesus himself as at Jesus' messianic hopes.

The John account makes this particularly clear. In John 19, we read the following. When Jesus came out, wearing the crowns of thorns and the purple robes, Pilate said to them, Here is the man. As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, Crucify! Crucify! But Pilate answered, You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.

[20:50] And we notice that Pilate puts above the cross these words. This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.

Both Matthew and John tell us that. It's a deliberate dig at Jewish pretensions. Again, it's worth reading the John account. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross.

It read, Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, Do not write the king of the Jews, but that this man claimed to be the king of the Jews. Jesus answered, What I have written, I have written.

It seems even Pilate had a sense of humour. The political scene was a putrid mess of sects and parties, each trying to outmanoeuvre the others. Any mistake was likely to result in a riot or worse.

[22:00] Pilate himself understood this well enough. He might have been cruel and cowardly, but he wasn't stupid. He was walking a political tightrope. He has to proclaim the Jewish leaders enough to prevent mayhem, but at the same time he pushes them as far as he dares to keep them down and make sure they know their place.

In fact, Jesus' calm dignity must have seemed like a breath of fresh air, which is perhaps why he is reluctant to pass sentence. But knees must.

He gives the Jewish leaders what they want, verse 24 of Matthew. 27. And yet he cannot resist the dig of the charge. This is the king of the Jews.

He cannot resist proclaiming this for anyone to see. The Jews are executing their own king. In fact, by contrast, the mockery of the soldiers seems more honest than the reaction of Pilate.

The soldiers make very clear what they think of this claim to Jewish sovereignty. They are only too pleased to have this opportunity to vent their scorn. Yet, as it happens, this would not be their last word.

[23:11] We'll come back to this shortly. But first, let's look at the next irony. And the second irony is that God laughs last.

This is perhaps not made obvious in Matthew's text, but it is implicit in his portrayal of the anointed king. The disciples think that it has all gone horribly wrong, as evidenced by Peter's denial.

But Psalm 2, verse 4, gives us the clue. The one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them. From the divine perspective, it is all under control.

The Lord looks down on this chaos, and he laughs at human foibles, but smiles at the obedience of Jesus. This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.

What of us humans? Who is the only human who seems to understand what is going on here? The danger they are skirting. It's Pilate's wife.

[24:20] We read this in verse 19. Perhaps we're told this as a counterpoint to Herodias' scheming to get rid of John the Baptist. Here, Pilate's wife actually tries to save Jesus.

Surely there is a flash of divine comedy at work here. Who really has the best grip on what is going on? Is it the educated Jewish scholars who have studied the scriptures for generations, looking for clues to the promised Messiah?

Is it the political heavyweights and experts of the Jewish establishment? No, it seems the only one who really understands what's going on is a woman who's having a bad day.

While the menfolk were trying to solve the problems of real politics, she has apparently had nothing better to do that day but sleep. And so God takes that opportunity to deliver a prophetic warning.

And she must have been very worried indeed to interrupt Pilate during the trial. She's having a really bad day. Pilate was not known for being a just judge.

[25:32] He was a politician first. Expediency rather than justice was his style. His wife must have known her other travesties of justice. But this particular one has got to her.

She understands that Jesus is the one thing that no one else here can claim to be, a righteous man. And so she gives Pilate his final warning, delivered through this bizarre intervention in the proceedings.

God is saying to Pilate, don't say I didn't warn you. You still have time to reconsider. But of course, the warning is ignored.

Who cares about bad dreams? What do women know about politics? Immediately after the wife's warning, Barabbas, who was actually guilty of the crime Jesus is accused of, is released.

doubtless there is a heavenly chuckle over that irony. We hear no more about Pilate's wife, but her bad day did not end any better than it had started.

[26:42] No wonder the Lord scoffs, but the Lord's laughter is not to be taken lightly. Psalm 2 goes on. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.

I will proclaim the decree of the Lord. He said to me, you are my son. Today I have become your father. That mockery of a coronation is actually the Lord installing his king.

And just in case you still haven't got the joke, the psalmist goes on to tell us that this king who nobody wanted will possess the ends of the earth. That flimsy reed of a staff is actually the iron scepter that will break the nations in pieces.

Those whose homage is phony, who spit instead of kiss, will find that his wrath can flare up in a moment. And yet his wrath as yet is delayed.

So here is a third irony. The joke rebounds on its perpetrators. Many a true word is spoken in jest.

[28:03] Whom does Matthew choose to deliver the final words of this drama? The answer is rather unexpected. Throughout the whole crucifixion,

the onlookers keep up their barrage of heckling.

But there are exceptions. Luke chooses to tell us of a repentant thief. But Matthew chooses to give the last words to those soldiers who have been so active in mocking Jesus.

In chapter 27, verse 54, we read, the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened.

They were terrified and exclaimed, surely he was the son of God. Notice he's not just the officer, but his squad is also. Not the whole 600 Praetorian guards, of course, but the unit detailed to carry out the crucifixions.

This was doubtless a duty they'd carried out before. It was brutal, but all in a day's work for an imperial soldier. They'd watch many men die over their time of service.

[29:15] The doubtless seen death met with bravery or with fear, with despair or with anger. But this death was different. The day that started as a chance for some fun at the expense of a despised prisoner had ended with awe.

Let's not make the mistake of reading the soldier's comment in a Christian context. Romans regarded their emperor as a son of the gods.

They have suddenly realised that this prisoner, that they had so belittled and mocked, actually had a legitimate claim to royal authority after all. The jokers rebounded on them, this coronation that they had carried out as mockery turned out to be the lord himself installing his king.

This poor teacher, who had not even made a decent fight over his arrest, had died the portentous death of an emperor. The guard and crown and scepter and bowing that had been so amusing that morning took on a different spin now.

So the drama of the crucifixion, but not the reign of the king, comes to an appropriate end. Matthew has chosen his side. The king needs a coronation.

[30:50] But what is our attitude to it? Was it a pantomime? Or was it an extraordinary display of royal majesty? The wrath of the king did not flare up at once, so some of these soldiers at least had a chance to reconsider, but many of those gathered on that day did not.

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, you are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourselves.

Come down from the cross if you are the son of God. In the same way the chief priests the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. He saved others, they said, but can't save himself.

He is the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. That was Matthew 27, 39 to 42. And yet Jesus did return from the place of death.

The cross and the tomb would be empty. And yet for the most part, they still would not believe. these events all happened 2,000 years ago.

[32:02] They're ancient history. And yet the same choices face us. Will we pour scorn on Jesus' claim to kingship? Will we dismiss the gospels as mere fantasy and pantomime, fairy tales?

angels? Or will we crown Jesus in our hearts? Will we be wise and kiss the sun in truth before the wrath flares up?

Jesus himself had warned us that not everyone who calls him Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven. Will we call him Lord, Lord, and yet not mean it?

Will we call him Lord, Lord, in mockery and disobedience? Or will we be like that Roman officer and acknowledge Jesus as a true king?

Is our hail king of the Jews just a mockery? If that is our heart, we need to heed the warning of Pilate's wife, or we'll suffer much worse than just a bad dream and a bad day.

[33:11] But if we truly acknowledge Jesus as king, then he promises to bring us to himself and to be part of his kingdom on the last day.

So what is it to be? I trust that you will join me in closing our time together by singing a genuine shout of praise, hail to the Lord's anointed.

We'll close our time by singing that song. great Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greatest son.

Hail in the time of falling dead, his reign on earth begun. He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free.

