

The King's Humility

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from Matthew chapter 21, verses 1 to 17.

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet. Say to daughter Zion, See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, Who is this?

[1 : 3 8] The crowds answered, This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

It is written, he said to them, My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers. The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them.

But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did, and the children shouting in the temple courts, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant. Do you hear what those children are saying?

They asked him, Yes, replied Jesus. Have you never read? From the lips of children and infants, you, Lord, have called forth your praise. And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. Good morning, Christ Church. This Palm Sunday is the day, and it's really the doorway through which we enter into Holy Week, at which time Christians all over the world every year gather together to read and to remember and to prayerfully celebrate the final days of Jesus leading up to his climactic crucifixion and his resounding resurrection.

[3 : 0 4] If you're here today and you're exploring Christianity, I want to say this is a wonderful time to have a front row seat into what Christianity is all about. If you've ever wondered why Christians see this as the turning point in history and the center point of humanity, if you've ever wondered how in the world can the life and the death of someone in the first century have an impact on me here in the 21st century, my life, my condition, my destiny, this is a great time.

There's no better time, really, to get involved and to come and ask these questions. If you're a Christian, perhaps you've experienced many, many Holy Weeks through the years.

You know Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday like they're old friends. And my prayer and hope for you this week is that you would be surprised by God, that his Son and his Spirit would meet you in some fresh and powerful ways.

The Gospels have been described as passion narratives with long introductions. And that's because all four Gospels really spend the latter half of their narratives talking about the suffering of Jesus from four different angles, four different perspectives.

That is that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they give us a total of 30 chapters on this final week of Jesus' life leading up to his death on the cross. And so I imagine that even for those of us who are deeply familiar with these events, that somewhere in those 30 chapters, you might encounter something that you haven't encountered before.

[4 : 51] You might integrate this week something into your faith and life that you haven't integrated before. And that's my prayer, that the Lord would reveal more of himself to you, more of his presence and more of his power.

So here's Palm Sunday. It's recorded for us in all four Gospels. What does it mean and why does it matter for us and for our lives?

I think this narrative before us in Matthew 21 tells us that Jesus is the King who rides a donkey and transforms the temple.

Jesus is the King who rides a donkey and transforms the temple. I want to focus for a minute on this theme of Jesus as the King. A lot of us, we assume that on Palm Sunday, he kind of just stumbles into Jerusalem and sees the reaction of the crowd.

And he says, oh, shucks. Okay, I guess, I guess. You know, I'll go along with this. But really, Jesus is this reflective theologian and a strategic revolutionary who's given a great deal of thought and energy to what he's going to do and what he's going to say to intentionally bring his story to a climax and to bring his public vocation to its proper conclusion.

[6 : 08] And so what we have here is premeditated symbolic action. Jesus is making all these decisive, calculated arrangements to enter into the holy city on this particular Passover feast.

In verses 2 to 3, he's giving detailed directions to his advance team. And he says, this is how I want you to set up the staged campaign. And in many ways, Jesus is recreating an enthronement scene.

In the ancient Near East, a king would go out to battle. They would defeat their enemies. And then they would return in victory. And they'd be welcomed back into their capital city with great celebration.

And Jesus says, that's what we're doing. For one mile, for 30 minutes, there's going to be this red carpet event, this ticker tape parade where people are going to welcome their king in this royal reception and procession.

Now, how do the crowds and how do the disciples respond to this? Well, it says in verse 8, that a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

[7 : 21] Now, you can imagine a person visiting our city and you see a crowd of people taking off their very nice and very expensive jackets to lay them down in the dirt for people and animals to walk on.

And what do you conclude? You conclude this must be a very important person, a person that's worthy of great respect and great honor. You also conclude this is a great time to be in the dry cleaning business because that's a lot of dirty jackets on the ground.

And what about these branches? The Gospel of John tells us that these are palm branches. And every Jew would know the meaning of this because 200 years before this time, there had been a Jewish rebellion.

The Greek Empire had been oppressing the Jews, had outlawed their practices of Sabbath and Scripture and the sacrament of circumcision. They went and set up pagan idols in all the Jewish towns.

They even set up pagan idols in the temple in Jerusalem itself. And there was this one family, the Maccabean family. They led a rebellion that was successful and enabled Israel to practice their faith freely again.

[8 : 29] And that's what's celebrated in the festival of Hanukkah. But after that great rebellion, this family made a crest and the nation minted new coins.

And you know what was on that crest and on those coins? Palm branches. Palm branches became the symbol of the nation. It became a symbol of resistance and revolt.

It became a symbol of liberation and freedom. And so they're laying down their coats, but they're also laying down their palms before Jesus. And what else does it say that the crowds give to him?

It says in verse 9 that the crowds went ahead of him and those followed behind him and they shouted. They shouted. Now, why are they shouting so loudly?

Well, if you go back and you skim the Gospel of Matthew, you can read all about these great deeds of supernatural power that Jesus performed over Satan, over the demons, over disease and seizures and paralysis, where he healed people who were crippled and he healed people who were blind.

[9 : 37] And he fed 5,000 people and he calmed the storm and he raised the dead. And most outrageously of all, he said to people, your sins are forgiven.

Jesus is exercising the power and the authority of God over sickness and over nature and over death and even over our greatest problem. Sin is selfishly ignoring our Creator God and Jesus says, that's okay, I can deal with that too.

And that's why these people say, this isn't just one king in a long line of kings. This is the king. This is God's only chosen king.

And so they're shouting at the top of their voices and what are they saying? They're saying, Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven.

Hosanna in the highest heaven. This is Passover. And so this is one of their Passover hymns, Psalm 118. And it basically means, long live God's king. Because all through Moses and the prophets, all through the Old Testament, they were, Israel was looking for a king in the line of David who would come and put everything right.

[10 : 50] This is a victory chant of Israel's hope that God will help us, that God will save us. That's what Hosanna means. God, save us.

Come and defeat our foes. Come and bring deliverance to your people. Come and establish your kingdom of peace in its fullest measure. Now, I believe that hope for a king is not just a Jewish hope, but it's a deeply human hope.

And of course, there's a bit of a problem because we're Americans and we don't suffer our sovereigns lightly, do we? We like to be our own masters and the authorities of our own lives and in charge of our own selves, right?

You look at the flag of the Commonwealth of Virginia and what does it say? It says, Sic semper tyrannis, thus always to tyrants, where it has Lady Liberty or Lady Justice, I'm not sure which.

She has her foot on the chest of a king who's lying on the ground and his crown is toppled off of his head. Thus always to tyrants is what we Americans say.

[11 : 57] This is how we like our government, of the people, by the people, and for the people. And yet, there's a tension there for us because even though we're Americans, most of our literature and most of our movies abounds with kings and queens and royal figures and messianic heroes.

Why is that? Why are we so fascinated by royal weddings? I know some of you are. Royal babies, royal coronations. Why is that?

Well, C.S. Lewis wrote an essay in 1943 and he says this. He says, We Britons should rejoice that we have contrived to reach a much legal democracy without losing our ceremonial monarchy.

A man's reaction to monarchy is a kind of test. Monarchy can be easily debunked, but watch the faces. Mark the accents of the debunkers. These are the men whose taproot in Eden has been cut.

Whom no rumor of the polyphony, the dance can reach. Men to whom pebbles laid in a row are more beautiful than an arch. Now, that's an Oxford professor's way of insulting me, right?

[13 : 10] And people like me. But here's what he says. He says, Yet even if they desire equality, they cannot reach it. Where men are forbidden to honor a king, they honor millionaires, athletes, or film stars instead.

Even famous prostitutes or gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served, deny it food, and it will gobble poison.

See, Lewis is telling us that in our heart of hearts, we long to honor a king. And you can tell yourself you don't need a king, but your spiritual nature says otherwise.

We're starving to crown someone who has the authority to give us identity and belonging and meaning and purpose and significance and value.

We're longing to say to someone who's much greater than ourselves, much higher than ourselves, please tell me that I matter. Please give me a peace that I cannot achieve on my own.

[14 : 14] Please give me a glory that's greater than what I've got. Now, why do we do that as human beings psychologically and culturally? Well, before the breaking of our world, the human race stood in the presence of the true king in absolute glory and splendor, a king of justice and power and wisdom, a king of great compassion and nobility and beauty who was shining like the sun and yet evil entered our world and we became our own masters and we lost that king and yet we did gain this promise in Genesis 3.15 that said this great one is going to come and he's going to trample on evil and even though he will be wounded and he'll suffer terribly, he will triumph, right?

And the whole Bible from that point on is just rustling with this whisper and this rumor of a king who's going to come so that on Palm Sunday when Jesus comes in and people begin to treat him as a king, he does not blush, he smiles.

Jesus receives their praises and he embraces their hopes and he affirms all of their desires and he says, yes indeed, I have come in the name of the Lord. I do intend to be your king, I do hear your cries of Hosanna and I do intend to save you.

Now those are incredible, audacious, implicit, really immodest claims that Jesus is making on Palm Sunday and I believe his dramatic entry into the capital city is a throwing down of the gauntlet.

It's Jesus saying, crown me or kill me. I'm either of ultimate importance or of no importance whatsoever but the one thing I cannot be is of marginal importance to any of you.

[16:12] Jesus is saying, I've not come to be admired, no, I've come to force my identity upon you. I've come to be a supreme and absolute monarch who's to be worshipped and to be obeyed.

And so if you're here today and you're exploring Christianity, I want to ask you as you hear about these mass shootings, you know, as you take in the news about these school shootings with these small children and their teachers, isn't there something inside of you that's crying out and longing for evil to be trampled upon and to be triumphed over?

And my question to you is, if that longing is in your heart, how in the world is that going to happen? How will that possibly happen within the reigning plausibility structures and paradigms of modernity and post-modernity?

Who will make it happen? Who will usher in a new age? And if you can't come up with anyone to fill in that blank, I want to ask you, might it be that Jesus really is the king who's come to undo all the powers of evil and Jesus is the king who's come to ultimately eradicate the presence of evil in this world?

Your heart is crying out for that. If you're a Christian, you've come to see that Jesus is your supreme and absolute monarch, but the question for you today is, how are you going to roll out the red carpet for your king this week and in this next season?

[17:57] How will you put your donkey at his service, as it were? How will you put all of your possessions at his disposal for him to use as he sees fit? How will we spread out our cloaks for him to walk upon and give him our highest and our best to honor him this week?

How will we wave our palm branches and give him public allegiance and let the world know that all of our hopes for freedom and liberation are found in him and him alone?

How will we sing these psalms and hymns and songs of the Spirit giving him the passionate worship that he deserves? I want to encourage you this week, if you do see Jesus as your king, to wake up every morning praying this prayer, blessed are you.

Blessed are you who's come in the name of the Lord. Hosanna. Save us. Lord, save us. Friends, Jesus is the king.

But Jesus is not just any king. He's the king who rides a donkey. Jesus is the king who rides a donkey. Now, many of us, this idea, this notion of living under a sovereign is perhaps threatening.

[19:14] I mean, I'm like you. I want to be in control. I don't want to submit my will and my desires to the will and desires of another. And I've read enough history like you to know that history is full of kings and queens that are marked by overweening pride and oppressive power.

Kings who rule not to enhance human life but to diminish human life. But I want to suggest to you today that Jesus is different. I want you to notice his chosen means of transportation.

It's not a war horse. It's a donkey. And in the first century and in our century, everybody looks at that and goes, what? Jesus, what are you thinking?

This is your moment to make history. This is your moment to be like Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus. This is your moment to have your name up there with Attila the Hun and Charlemagne and William the Conqueror and Genghis Khan and Napoleon.

Jesus, don't you realize that right now is your moment. You can either triumph and deliver or you can be trampled upon and demolished. But this is the moment. This is a do or die situation.

[20 : 31] So Jesus, let us come around you with all of our wisdom and be your PR consultants for a moment. Let us be your marketing team. If we're going to give you a brand, if we're going to give you a logo, if we're going to give you a message, we really want to encourage you, Jesus, to come up with something that exudes power and pride.

And what does Jesus do? How does he respond to this great advice that we have to give him? He chooses a little baby donkey. And he says, I don't need the mighty steed of a triumphant king.

I want this donkey. And Jesus, when he says that, he's making a statement about the kind of king he would be because he's a serious student of the Bible. His main purpose and aim is to bring his life under the authority of the Bible and to live in alignment with the power of God's word.

And he knows, since he's been a small child, he's memorized the prophecies of the Bible like this one in Genesis 49. It says, the scepter of the king will not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nation shall be his.

He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch. Jesus also probably memorized these words that are in our text today, Zechariah chapter 9.

[22 : 02] which says, Rejoice greatly, daughter Zion. Shout, daughter Jerusalem. See, your king comes to you righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

And then the next verse that's not printed for us, it says this. It says, I will take away the chariots from Ephraim, the war horses from Jerusalem. The battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. Jesus says, my brand, my logo, my message is definitively not the chariot and not the war horse and not the battle bow.

And Jesus has so arranged this moment to deliberately fulfill these prophecies. He says, don't get me wrong, I have come to rule and to reign as your king, but I've not come to rule in any of the ways you're used to ruling.

He says, I've not come in the shining armor of a war horse. He says, I've come to make donkeys great again. This is a king who's going to ride Eeyore.

[23 : 25] He's riding this beast that's fit for a child, that's fit for a hobbit. A beast of such extraordinary humility. Now, I want us to think for a second.

Why do we resist submitting to a sovereign? Well, we resist because a sovereign by nature demands total surrender, an exclusive allegiance, an absolute obedience.

And Jesus says, I have, in fact, come to demand those things of you, but I'm unlike any king the world has ever seen. Again, if you go back and read the Gospels, you see Jesus time and time again.

First of all, he resists the offer of the devil to rule over the kingdoms of this world through illicit means. And then, having resisted that offer, he goes out and he preaches the Sermon on the Mount where he says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you, and blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.

At one point, they tried to come and make Jesus king by force, but he resisted that as well and he withdrew himself into the wilderness. And we'll see later this week when he's on trial before the Roman Empire, on trial under Pontius Pilate, he tells Pilate, he says, if my kingdom were of this world, my people would fight for me.

[24 : 50] But as it is, my kingdom is from another place and therefore, it's altogether different from your kingdom. Friends, Jesus rides in humble and meek and gentle and lowly on a donkey to tell us, I'm a king that you can trust.

My power is the power of my lowliness. My power is the power of giving up my power. Friedrich Nietzsche philosophized in the 19th century, he philosophized about the will to power.

He said, modernity should be marked by dominating, an ethic of dominating power. And then in Nietzsche's wake came another philosopher, his successor, Michel Foucault in the 20th century and he said, we should unmask all of these power relations, these pervasive, internalized, structured powers of modernity need to be subverted into a post-modernity if any of us are going to survive.

And of course, the world we're living in in the 21st century is some strange brew, some powerful cocktail between Nietzsche and Foucault, is it not? But what if the world needs not the uber power of Nietzsche or the deconstructed power of Foucault?

No. But what if the world needs a different kind of power altogether? The power of a sovereign who comes not to take life but to give life. The power of a sovereign who comes not bearing arms but comes to disarm us all.

[26 : 34] This donkey king comes to us not saying surrender or else. No, he comes with no horse, no sword, no army. He does not use any brute force to seize and coerce and demolish and pillage and enslave and oppress.

He comes vulnerable and defenseless on a donkey. And he says, I've come to serve you as a gentle and a lowly prince of peace.

I've come not to threaten you and to surrender. I've come, in fact, to surrender myself and my life to you. And we're going to see that this next week as we go through the events of Holy Week.

Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus giving the poured out wine and the broken bread. And Jesus literally doing that on the cross.

Taking our judgment upon himself. God's just judgment for our sins. And again, if you're exploring Christianity, is there any other power like this?

[27 : 38] Is this not utterly unique in all the world, all the philosophies of this world, all the religions, all the life systems of this world? Is there any other kind of power like this?

And even more to the point, what are you afraid is going to happen to you if you submit yourself to this donkey king? He's not going to oppress you.

He's going to liberate you and humanize you. He's not going to disempower you. He's going to empower you with this sacrificial love. And so, I want to implore you, open the gates of your city.

Open the doors of your heart to welcome this king of lowliness, this king of gentleness to come and be your king even this week. Jesus is the king and he rides on a donkey.

but he also comes to transform the temple and I just want to say a final word about this transformation of the temple. Jesus comes and he comes over the Mount of Olives.

[28 : 45] He comes in full view of Jerusalem and its magnificent temple at the center which is not only the beating heart of Israel, it's the center of the cosmos. This is the place where heaven and earth come together, the house of I am who I am where he dwells among his people.

And it says Jesus in verse 12, he entered into that place, he entered the temple courts and he drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables and the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

Why in the world is Jesus relocating all the people and rearranging all the furniture? Why is he disrupting this sacrificial system? Doesn't he know this is not how to win friends and influence people?

Why in the world is he making such a ruckus in the temple of Almighty God? Well he says in verse 12, he says, verse 13, he says, it is written, my house will be called a house of prayer but you're making it a den of robbers.

That's a provocative quote from the prophet Jeremiah where Jesus is begging the question, whose house is this? And Jesus says, well it's my house. Wait, what do you mean?

[29 : 59] Jesus, God's house or your house? Yes, Jesus says. This is the place where you're to come in contact with your creator God. The place where by his word and by prayer and by the sacrifices of blood you can have a personal, intimate communion and relationship with God himself.

But Jesus is signaling to us that something has gone deeply wrong with this place of sacrifice and this place of worship and this is why he's come to enter Jerusalem.

This is why he's marching to Good Friday so that he can become the true temple. So that he can become the true priest and the true sacrifice and the true place of communion between humanity and God.

He's come so that people who are far away from this temple can be brought near to God so that people who are enemies of this temple can be made children of God and that's why Jesus is not surprised at all by this great turn from Palm Sunday to Good Friday.

He comes in as a king on Palm Sunday but he leaves as a criminal on Good Friday. He comes on a donkey but he leaves under a cross. He comes hailed with palms but he leaves bearing a crown yet it's a crown of thorns.

[31 : 23] He comes in hearing hosannas but he leaves with this cry of crucify. He comes in bearing our praises and yet he leaves bearing our reproach.

So why Jesus? Why? Why would you do that? Why would you so deliberately and even joyfully enter into all of this suffering? Well we'll learn and hear it at the end of this week from Matthew chapter 27 verse 51.

It says that when Jesus Christ our king died on his cross the veil in this great magnificent temple that separated a holy God from unholy humanity would be torn in two from top to bottom.

And that's a picture of the very hands of God rending this separation between us. Of God saying as it were my innocent sons once for all sacrifice of himself on his cross is throwing down the sin barriers throwing down this separation so that the way in the way into my holy presence is opened up for all people.

The whole wide world can come back in and that's why our king came riding on a donkey to transform this temple.

[32 : 43] Jesus has come to bring us back to the house of almighty God. Jesus has come so that each of us could be at home again with our heavenly father.

Jesus has come so that we can enjoy a relationship with him as dearly loved and dependent children. Each of us enjoying such a personal and intimate communion with God that our church and our homes and our very hearts might be called a house of prayer so that God can look upon us that God can look upon you God can look upon me and he can say that's my house that's the place where I delight to dwell among these people and in this place this is my home and this is where God wants us to be at home with him.

May it be so as we enter into this most holy of weeks in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.