

Enter the King

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can sit together under your word to hear you speak and be challenged by you.

Please, Father, sustain my voice and sustain us all to hear the truth of your word and to know how to respond. Amen. Well, have you ever been left in charge and shirked your responsibilities? Maybe the teacher left you in charge, but instead of working, you let the class play games. Maybe your parents left you with the house and some money, and instead of eating sensibly, you decided to eat maccas and pizza every night.

When my siblings and I were in high school just a few years ago, my parents would occasionally go away and leave us kids to look after ourselves.

My sister, the oldest, would be in charge, but we'd all chip in. They'd leave some money for food and whatever else we needed. Now, my sister was a bit of a rebel, so whenever my parents left, she'd be like, Right, I'm having a party. You guys can invite friends if you want to.

[1 : 21] And I'm not talking about a small gathering. These were big, loud, noisy parties. My sister and brothers had a responsibility to look after the house and keep things in order, but they didn't.

And I was caught up in their rebellion as well. Clearly, I'm painting myself as the innocent one. Whenever mum and dad were on the way, there was always a mad rush to clean everything up, get it back to normal.

We had to get everything back in place, and most of the time we did. Well, today is Palm Sunday. I wonder if you can tell.

Palm Sunday is about a week before Jesus' arrest and trial and execution. Jesus knew what was coming, and he was deliberately making his way to Jerusalem where it would happen.

In tonight's passage, Jesus arrives at Jerusalem, and despite the warm welcome he receives, these are not his people, and he is not their king.

[2 : 34] The passage begins with Jesus and his disciples approaching Jerusalem. And unlike every other time he's come for Passover, this time he comes with purpose in order to fulfill Scripture.

Point one. In the opening verses, Jesus sends a couple of his disciples into town ahead of him with some special instructions. He tells them, you'll find a donkey tied up with its colt, that's the baby, and you ought to bring them out to me.

Now, the disciples are obviously pretty familiar with Jesus since they don't question this. If someone told me to go into the city and unlock a few bikes and bring it back to them, I'd be pretty worried that I was going to get arrested or attacked.

But the disciples, they do as they're told. And as far as we can see, they don't have any issues. So why this strange request?

Well, take a look in your Bibles at verse 4. 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, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

[3 : 50] Jesus isn't just rocking up to Jerusalem for Passover like any other year, and he's probably been every year. Many times in Matthew's gospel that we see a line like this, this took place to fulfill.

Jesus' coming brings fulfillment in many ways, and here, Jesus comes to Jerusalem as king, just as God had promised. Now, I'm not sure how many people usually rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, but it seems like the crowd who were there to receive him knew exactly what was happening.

Look from verse 8. It says, In the Old Testament, at times when someone became king, their supporters would lay their cloaks on the ground under him.

When these people saw Jesus approaching on a donkey, they realized what was happening. They recognized the image of their king coming according to prophecy.

Just look what happens when he eventually enters the city in verse 10. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, Who is this? The crowds answered, This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.

[5 : 42] Jesus wasn't just another prophet coming to town. It was the prophet. The prophet was prophesied by Moses in Deuteronomy. It was said that he'd speak the very words of God, and they'd be expected to obey him, and even they would be held accountable to him.

As I've been reading over these passages during the week, I've been reminded of the Lord of the Rings. Now, if you haven't seen it or read it, I'm not going to spoil anything, but it's been 20 years. As I read it, I keep being reminded of Aragorn and his journey to the throne. There's a scene in the fellowship, the first book, with Boromir. His father is the steward of the city that Aragorn's going to. He's telling Aragorn about the day when they returned to Gondor together. Boromir talks about how the flags will be raised, the trumpets will be blown, the people will cheer because the lords of Gondor have returned.

Do you know that scene? This image comes to mind when I read this passage. It's an image of triumph. The whole city stirred up by the arrival of the king.

[7 : 06] And, you know, if this was all the information we had about Jesus' trip to Jerusalem, it'd be hard to believe that he'd be dead by their hands a week later, wouldn't it?

What we'd more likely believe is that Jesus had gathered a band of merry men and booted the Romans out. But this isn't all we have.

Jesus was king and he had come to rule, but despite what it looked like, these were not his people. Jesus entered Jerusalem with triumph and praise as king, but his work wasn't over.

He went to the temple. Have a look. Verse 12. Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there.

He overturned the tables of 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.

[8 : 16] In the Old Testament, the faithful kings established faithful worship. They led the people in obedience and God blessed them.

But in Jesus' day, the Jewish leadership was corrupt and selfish. They considered themselves disciples of Moses, students of the law awaiting the promised king.

But when Jesus comes to this temple, he calls it the same as what God called it through Jeremiah, a den of robbers. The temple was supposed to be a place where they drew near to God and they made it a place of idolatry.

Now, I must say, if someone came to my church and told me that everything I was doing in honor and service of God was wrong, it would be hard to hear, though the Bible does often say this to us, doesn't it?

So I guess I can empathize with the priests who don't like what Jesus is up to. But if I called myself a God fearer, someone who obeyed scripture and was looking for God's king, well, I wouldn't have a leg to stand on, would I?

[9 : 34] Because while Jesus might be making a mess of my temple, he's also doing just what the Messiah was promised to do.

Isaiah had prophesied in chapter 35 that at his coming, the blind will see and the lame will leap, which is just what Jesus did at this point. And not only this, but the children are praising Jesus in the way God is praised in Psalm 8.

While the religious leaders claim to be waiting for the king, their behavior when Jesus arrives proves what is really true. Instead of seeing these things and realizing that their king has come, what were they doing?

They were indignant, jealous, angry, annoyed. This reminds me of the Lord of the Rings as well, particularly of Denethor.

He's in the third book or movie in The Return of the King. He's the steward of Gondor. And as the steward, his role was to rule the city in place of the king so that when the king eventually comes, he will hand the throne and power over to the true king.

[10 : 57] But when Denethor hears about Aragorn traveling with Gandalf, I wonder if anyone knows what he says. He says, the rule of Gondor is mine.

The steward has forgotten his role. And instead of supporting the return of the king, he's actually become an enemy. It's not too different to the Jewish priests in the time of Jesus.

They called themselves obedient to God. But when God sent his king, they didn't want a bar of it. I actually think there's a warning for us here, isn't there?

Because every time we gather as God's people, whether like this or like normal, we hear God speak and we're reminded about God's true king. This is a warning for us because there are other kings. There are other masters who are vying for our attention. And I don't know about you, but a critical person who's watching my life throughout the week, they might sometimes say that my allegiance is up for sale.

[12:12] But when God speaks to us, he says, no, it's me. I'm the king, your king, your God, your savior.

When the Jewish priests, the ones chosen to lead God's people in worship and godliness, when they saw their king, not only were they indignant, well, they eventually killed him, didn't they? They had decided who their king was and it wasn't Jesus. Tonight, as we listen to God speak, he is reminding you, reminding us who the true king is, the one who is praised by God, who heals and protects, who died to save.

How will you respond tonight to this reminder? Hosanna to the son of David, savior. Fear or frustration, rejection.

Well, the passage ends with something quite peculiar. Jesus had come to Jerusalem with praise and healing. And then what feels like out of nowhere, Jesus curses a fruitless tree.

[13:34] Have a look. Verse 18.3. Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it, but found nothing except leaves.

Then he said to it, may you never bear fruit again. Immediately, the tree withered. What's particularly striking about this story is what I think is the obvious purpose.

You might ask, how is it obvious? We'll just think. The author tells us nothing about their night. See, it's the next day. Nothing about where they stayed.

Nothing about their meal. Just this odd story about a fig tree without fruit. Why is it here? Why doesn't Matthew just jump straight to verse 23 and the conversation with the priests?

Surely that would make sense considering the previous interaction in the temple. So I begin to wonder, what is the purpose? What could it be?

[14:45] Just another miracle? A sign of God's power? It does show something pretty remarkable about Jesus, doesn't it? And then I wondered about the rest of the passage and what I thought Jesus was saying to his disciples about it.

You too can do it if you pray with belief. But this seemed wrong. Because just as we recently heard in Luke, so also in Matthew, Jesus had only recently told his disciples that it wasn't super miracle faith, but little genuine faith that mattered.

And on top of all this, why the destruction of the tree? Why not use one of the miracles from the day before?

Why couldn't that be the lesson for them? Because Jesus isn't teaching the disciples about what they can do.

He's teaching them about what he is about to do. The fig tree, which is a common image of Israel and the prophets, is a sign of the fruitless Israel that we've just witnessed.

[16:04] Like this leafy, healthy looking tree. Jesus' triumphant entrance into town looked like he was coming to his own.

But his visit to the temple revealed otherwise, didn't it? Jesus curses the fruitless fig tree as a sign of the coming judgment on God's fruitless people.

His people who have forgotten their king and their God. Once again, it reminds me of the return of the king in Lord of the Rings.

There's a scene in the third movie. Gandalf and Pippin arrive at Gondor and there's a white tree. It's the tree of the king, but it's dead.

And when Pippin asks about it, Gandalf explains that it only flowers when a true king is on the throne. As Aragorn, the true king, nears Gondor and victory, the tree begins to flower.

[17:15] When Jesus came to town like a king, gentle and riding on the donkey, it looked like he was home. But in less than a week, the same people killed the king God sent to save them.

Israel had forgotten their God. Even the priests had abandoned him. And so their judgment was coming. At Easter, we're reminded again of the death and resurrection of our coming king.

And that he is coming back. And when he comes, he will bring salvation to those waiting for him and judgment for those who aren't.

And so it's good for us to ask, what should I be doing in light of this? Well, I think there's one challenge in particular that I want to draw your attention to.

Don't ignore or forget the true king. There's a difference, isn't there, between looking like believers and being believers. When Jesus came to town, he received a warm reception.

[18 : 30] The whole city responded with what looked like great positivity. But it was just leaves and no fruit. Only a week later, the same crowd was shouting crucify.

Around Easter, I get the impression that support for Jesus around the place increases a bit, even if only slightly. I tend to see more articles about Jesus and his death.

Various documentaries about the tomb and his family. A whole load of memes. Usually it's a chance for lots of people to go to church.

The first of two annual visits. Before he realized how bad COVID-19 was, Trump kept saying people need to be in church by Easter.

Might make you think he cares about Jesus. But like the crowd, it's easy to get swept up in the excitement of Easter, isn't it?

[19 : 31] And talk about Jesus more than usual. And what I want to ask is, where are these people a week or two later? Are they still celebrating the coming of Jesus?

Have they realized the significance of Jesus' death? Are they still praising him when he has taken control of their life?

What about you? Do you feel the need to jump on the Jesus train a little bit more at Easter? To give another showing of praise?

Maybe I'll impress God for another year. Sounds a bit harsh to say that. I doubt anyone who usually sits here thinks like this. But I don't know your heart.

And mine tends to wonder. Who is your king this Easter? Who is your king today?

[20 : 34] Who is your king today? Who is your king today? Who is your king today? Who is your king today? Who is your king today? Who is your king today? My siblings and I thought we were pretty good kids. We mostly did the right thing.

But in reality, we were trashing our parents' trust. On one occasion, we took it too far and got in big trouble. Like with Israel, it's very easy to live among God's people and to do God things.

But Jesus knows who his people are. At the cross, Jesus destroyed his enemies and their judgment is coming.

And like we saw last week, it will be sudden and final. Don't wait for the return of the king.

Don't even wait for Easter. Make Jesus your king now before it's too late. How about I ask for God's help to do this?

[21 : 44] Heavenly Father, we thank you for the coming of our saviour king. We thank you that we can remember Jesus' triumph. Because even though he was headed to his death, we know it was for our salvation and the judgment of his enemies.

Father, help us to trust the true king Jesus, not just at Easter, but always. Amen.