

The King is Here

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Date: 29 December 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everyone. Good start. Happy New Year. So we're back in Matthew's Gospel tonight after a brief break for Christmas.

And we're picking up in chapter 21 that you just heard Melanie read for us. And if you have your Bible open to 826, page 826, that would be very helpful. This new series is going to take us to the end of Matthew, which is going to be perfectly timed with Easter Sunday.

So that's our goal here. And Matthew 21 tonight, it begins this climactic section of Matthew's Gospel, eight chapters that narrate only one week in Jesus' life, his last week of earthly ministry. Jesus' last week, which begins with that dramatic entrance into Jerusalem, what we call the triumphal entry. And we know that this is a really important moment because it's recorded in all four Gospels.

Jesus deliberately and carefully arranges this public event to declare something about his identity, reveal what sort of Messiah or king he's going to be.

[1 : 1 0] And that's the first scene in verses 1 to 11. And then what's the very first thing that Jesus does when he enters the city? Well, he goes straight into the temple and he wrecks havoc on those buyers and sellers and money changers.

He drives them out of this place that is meant for worship. And that's the second scene, verses 12 to 17. And then finally in verses 18 to 22, we get the cursing of the fig tree.

I'm going to make you wait to find out what that strange incident is all about. So here's three headings, if that's helpful to you as we move through the text. First, the king's humility, verses 1 to 11.

And then the king's judgment in verses 12 to 17. And finally in 18 to 22, the kingdom's fruitfulness. Let's start with humility.

2019 saw Greta Thunberg take the world stage as she took her climate protest all around the world. Do you remember how Greta chose to travel when she came to the Americas?

[2 : 2 0] She didn't fly. She refused to fly, in fact. She chose instead to make a much longer journey across the Atlantic by yacht. And her very public decision was intended to draw attention to her message that we need to change our transportation habits.

It was very effective, wasn't it? Though not an efficient way to travel if you have small children. Or you're in a hurry. But that's exactly what Jesus is doing here as he enters Jerusalem.

He has carefully arranged his entrance to make a big point, to grab attention. There's no more hiding his identity from public. So look at verse 2 with me.

Go into the village, he says to his disciples, in front of you. And immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her, etc., etc. He gives them detailed instructions. Because Jesus is intending to go public with his identity as Messiah.

But not the sort of king who would enter the city in a chariot or on a war horse. No. You see, the president might have Air Force One and the Pope rides around in the Popemobile.

[3 : 2 9] But Jesus, the king, he deliberately chooses to ride into Jerusalem on what? On a donkey. In order to draw attention to what sort of Messiah he's going to be. Verse 4 gives us a clue to what his intentions are here.

It says that he did this to fulfill a prophecy from Zechariah in the Old Testament. So look at verse 5. Say to the daughter of Zion, that's Jerusalem, behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on the colt, full of a beast of burden.

Just a few verses previously in chapter 20. Or all the way back in November, if you like. Jesus declared that he has come not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

That's his mission statement. So a great king might rescue his people so that they can serve him. But only Jesus serves his people so that he might rescue them.

Jesus' humility in these verses is actually a foreshadowing. It's a foretaste of the ultimate humble sacrifice that he's going to be making on the cross in only five days.

[4 : 44] And by verse 10, we see that the whole city has heard about this triumphal entry, or maybe we should rename it the humble entry. And the crowds are buzzing. And it says in verse 10, when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, who is this?

Do you remember right around Christmas time, there was a whole series of earthquakes around Vancouver Island? I think the highest was in the low six on the Richter scale. Not really strong enough for us to feel here in Vancouver.

Well, the word translated, stirred up in verse 10, it's the word we get seismic from. So you could say, if you want to translate it, you could say, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the whole city is shaking.

And believe me, people, everyone can feel it. He's making a seismic entrance here. What makes them quake? Well, it's this question that everyone's asking in verse 10.

Who is this? It's the precise question that's right at the heart of Matthew's gospel, that he wants all of us to be asking constantly. Who is this Jesus?

[5 : 49] And there's going to be two more earthquakes in Matthew's gospel. As we make this journey towards Easter. The first is going to be in chapter 27. It's at the moment when Jesus dies on the cross.

And then the second earthquake is going to be in chapter 28. When the tombstone is rolled away and the women discover that Jesus has risen from the dead.

And those earthquakes, they're not going to just shake Jerusalem. They're going to shake the whole world. So let me simply encourage you tonight as we begin this new series following Jesus last week in Jerusalem.

Keep asking this question. Who is this? Don't assume that you know the answer. Don't assume you've got Jesus figured out. After all, just as we reach the end of verse 11 and we think that we're really going to be emphasizing Jesus' humility here, well, we're suddenly confronted by a completely different and equally compelling side to Jesus.

Which is what I want to look at secondly with you in verses 12 to 17. And we're calling this the King's judgment. If verses 1 to 11 were all that you had, all that you could ever know about Jesus, you would be forgiven if you thought that he was a little bit like Mr. Rogers.

[7 : 08] But remember, remember that Jesus' very first action when he enters the city is what?

He goes straight to the temple and he cleanses it. He purifies it. He judges it. He drives out those who are misusing this place of worship and then he explains his actions in verse 13.

It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you've made it a den of robbers. And Jesus is attacking at least three corruptions here.

The first is extortion. And we see this in the subtle suggestion that these money changers and these people who are buying and selling, well, imagine for a moment that you have to travel a great distance in order to worship in Jerusalem.

And you need to have a sacrifice for your worship. Well, you're not going to bring a pigeon or a goat or a cow or whatever 400 miles from somewhere up north. No, you're going to buy your sacrifice at the temple.

[8 : 13] Well, what do you have to do when you get to the temple? You've got to pay temple prices. So imagine for a moment this is a little bit like that moment when you wince at the movie theater and you fork over twice as much money for popcorn and soda as you would anywhere else and you just kind of grin and bear it.

There's nothing you can do about it. You're being extorted. That's exactly what is happening in the temple. And second, he's attacking the exclusion of non-Jews from temple worship.

And we see this because of the location of this cleansing. It's happening in a place called the Court of the Gentiles. It's a special area that was actually prepared for non-Jews, God-fearers, to have a place to pray and worship the Lord God.

But when the buying and selling of animals is taking place in that courtyard, it makes that impossible. I mean, just imagine trying to attend a Bible study or a church service in the middle of the Richmond night market.

It's not going to be helpful. The Lord had intended his people and his temple to be a light to the nations, to draw them in to have a place where they can worship the one true God.

[9 : 19] But instead, Israel discards that responsibility and unashamedly they exclude the Gentiles by setting up shop in their special space.

And this might be why we actually find Jesus healing the blind and the lame in the temple in verse 14. It's kind of out of the blue. Verse 14, this is the only time in the Gospels when Jesus is recorded as doing an actual healing inside the temple, not at the gates, not outside, inside the temple. And why now? Well, it's because Jewish tradition said that those who were deemed imperfect, well, they should be excluded from temple worship.

What's imperfect? Things like if you're sick, if you're unclean, if you're non-Jewish. There's no place for you in the temple. But as King Jesus cleanses and purifies the court of the Gentiles, he brings back this hope and this healing for those who were previously on the margins.

He welcomes in those who were previously left out. So first, Jesus attacks the extortionists.

Second, he attacks this deliberate exclusion of the Gentiles from salvation.

[10 : 35] And thirdly, he attacks the indignation of the religious leaders. If you look at verse 15 with me. When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did and the children crying out in the temple, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant.

And they said to him, Do you hear what these are saying? And Jesus said to him, Yes. Have you never read out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?

For the religious leaders, it is bad enough that they have to listen to the shouts from the crowd over there by the city gates, Hosanna in the highest. But how much worse it is now that they have to hear those same shouts not out there but in the very temple itself and by children no less.

And so they fume to Jesus. Do you hear what these are saying? And Jesus' response to them, it comes right from Psalm 8, which is a psalm where praise is carefully directed to the Lord God alone.

And astoundingly, Jesus is saying to them that this type of praise that was said to be only for God, well actually, it belongs to Jesus.

[11 : 53] It belongs to Jesus now. The children are praising him in the temple. It's one of the clearest examples of Jesus actually saying, Look, I'm God.

I'm the Son of God. God. So three times we see the king's judgment. And each of these judgments leads me to ask us tonight, what sort of church is St. John's seeking to be?

Are we a congregation that extorts the generosity of God by allowing money to matter too much or too little? Are we tempted to think that not having a church building might guarantee God's blessing any more than having a church building could ever guarantee God's blessing?

I pray that we're not. But are we a congregation that excludes? Do newcomers, outsiders, those on the margins, would they feel welcome here and receive the hospitality of Christ through this community?

And are we indignant when those around us break proper religious etiquette in church? Do we welcome the voices and the opinions of our children and our youth and our young people?

[13 : 16] I pray that we do. We come lastly and briefly to verses 18 to 22. The kingdom's fruitfulness.

The kingdom's fruitfulness. I promised that we would arrive at this strange scene of the cursing of the fig tree. And it's actually the only negative miracle in the gospel. Perhaps it reminds you a little bit of the day that Jesus cast out those demons from the pigs and they went flying over the cliff and they drowned and we all say poor pigs.

Well, poor fig tree. What did it do to deserve this? I can tell you that Jesus is not hungry. He's not hungry and then gets a little bit angry and just, bam, uses some of his magic power.

This is actually a deliberate moment. It's a deliberate action. It's a symbolic action, in fact. It's what you might call a teachable moment that he wants to use to closely connect with that judgment in the temple that took place the very previous day.

You see, the fig tree, it represented Israel and the temple in the Old Testament. So Jesus, he's walking, he sees a fig tree, it's in leafy bloom by the roadside and when a fig tree is covered in leaves, well, it's usually a sign that it's full of figs.

[14 : 37] It's advertising its fruitfulness. So he approaches in order to get some breakfast but he finds only leaves, no figs. It's false advertising.

He curses the tree and it withers. Well, in the same way, Israel's religion or our congregation at St. John's, wherever it advertises piety and spiritual fruitfulness, well, Jesus is going to stop and he's going to examine it and take a closer look.

And, if our religion is found to be hypocritical or spiritually barren, in other words, false advertising, then he curses it. He judges it. That it might wither and die off.

Why? Why would he want that to happen? It sounds terrible. Well, he does it for the sake of the hungry. That they might turn instead to a genuine, to a healthy, to a fruitful tree.

A tree that will actually give them spiritual food that can lead to eternal life. Okay. So be fruitful. It sounds like good advice. But, the last question really is, does Jesus give us any hints here about what kingdom fruitfulness might look like?

[15:53] I think he does. I think there's at least two fruit buds, if you will. The sort of thing that would be a blossom. That when you nurture it in the spirit, that it can actually bud and grow and become fruit.

And the first one is Christ-like humility. And the second is faithful prayer. So first, Christ-like humility. Well, we've already said that Jesus models this when he enters Jerusalem on the donkey, right?

But we also see it displayed by those children. This child-like humility of the children echoing what they've heard in the streets, crying out to Jesus, Hosanna to the Son of David.

Hosanna, which means save us. Crying out in humility, you could say, help me. I can't save myself. These children, well, they're speaking wiser truth than they probably even realize at the time, which is what children often do.

And so first, we see the kingdom fruitfulness of Christ-like humility from Jesus himself and from these children. And second, we see the fruitfulness that comes from faithful prayer.

[17:03] Jesus concludes these verses with a short teaching on prayer in verses 21 and 22. Why don't you look at those verses with me? Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, which is Jesus' way of saying, listen up, this is very important.

If you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith.

So twice here, Jesus mentions faith. Faith is not a holy hoping for the best. All throughout Matthew's gospel, faith is never about the worthiness or the strength of the one who's praying.

But it always refers instead to our intimate relationship of a practical trust, which is then blossoming as we place our day-to-day dependence on God, the one we pray to.

So faith in Matthew's gospel, it's much more about the relationship, not about something that's inside yourself. But it's about that day-to-day dependence on our triune God.

[18:11] And that's what prayer is all about. And so Jesus gently commends his disciples and us to pray boldly. You could retranslate verse 22 literally, ask believingly, ask trustingly.

Because kingdom fruitfulness is God's generous and abundant gift in Christ for all of those who abide in the vine. Do you remember that language from John's gospel when Jesus says, I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he or she will bear much fruit. That's the picture here that Jesus is giving us. And as we get ready to turn to interceding prayer, I want you to keep at the front of your mind the central question in these chapters of Matthew.

Who is this man? Because Jesus is going public with his identity. He shows us the king's humility. He shows us the king's judgment.

And he's calling us to follow him into the kingdom's fruitfulness. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[19:30] Amen.