

King Me

Mark 11:1-11a

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-8

CWZepp, BWCOP, March 29, 2015

About eleven years ago, a friend and I were standing in line to buy tickets to see Mel Gibson's new movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. We were joking around and I said to him, "You know, I'm not sure about this movie. I've heard that the lead guy dies in the end."

I'm not so sure that everyone around us got the humor. But it is hard to miss the irony of our yearly progression through the season of Lent – a time of repentance, denial, and self-examination as we consider and remember the death of Jesus – punctuated as it is with a day we traditionally call "Palm Sunday." The festive atmosphere, the palm branches and children's processions, the pomp and circumstance – and in our case even a traditional Easter Egg Hunt – all seem at best ironic and perhaps even morbidly suspect when we stop to consider that what we are celebrating is in reality our Savior's road to death. Pastor Kate Penfield, and I am sure others, has called Palm Sunday "the most confusing day in the church calendar".¹ In so many ways, this day is just a bit too ironic – it just doesn't fit when we know the ending. It seems almost cruel to recreate a festive atmosphere when we know dog-gone well that the Hosannas were a welcome into a death trap for Jesus.

But we do it anyway. It is tradition. "*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*" This refrain from Psalm 118 was originally sung to welcome a king returning home from a victorious battle and going to the Temple to offer thanks to God. But by the time of Jesus, this had become the standard greeting offered to the many pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for the festivals. Will Willimon suggests that this greeting had become, in effect, "Welcome to Jerusalem. Enjoy the festival, and have a nice day!"² We can be sure that Jesus was not the only one greeted that day with those words.

But there are also the palm branches and the cloaks spread in the road, and these are likely more telling of what the people of Jerusalem were really up to when they were greeting Jesus. Not every pilgrim was greeted with palm branches and garments laid in his path. They were a more unique spectacle, a patriotic display similar perhaps to the surge in American flags that were displayed everywhere and every way in the aftermath of 9/11³. The palm branches were a nationalistic sign, the garments on the ground an unmistakably royal gesture⁴, an expression of the Messianic hope with which the people greeted Jesus. He had developed a reputation, and it clearly preceded him. The people were ready for him, and ready for him to do what a Messiah was expected to do, what the heir to David's throne was supposed to do – to strike a blow against the hated Romans, and free the Jewish homeland.

The people wanted a great warrior king to be coming down that path. They wanted a national hero who would lead them to freedom. They wanted Aragorn and *The Return of the King*. And there were some signs that indicated Jesus would be just that. Some scholars have pointed to politically charged incidents throughout the gospels which show Jesus working to

¹ Shared in *Pulpit Digest* and quoted in a Palm Sunday sermon by Highland Avenue COB pastor Joel Kline delivered 4/4/2004. Available: http://www.hacob.org/sermons/2004/04-04-04_jdk.html

² *Pulpit Resource*, April 4, 2004.

³ Tom Long, as quoted in Kline's sermon.

⁴ See 2nd Kings 9:12-13

undermine the Roman government, such as when Jesus sends a legion of demons into a herd of pigs that would have been a primary food source for the occupying Roman soldiers.⁵ And on Palm Sunday when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt, it is almost certainly an intentional enactment of the prophesy of Zechariah 9:9, which reads “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.”

But there is also ample evidence that Jesus was not the messianic king that they were expecting. Jesus successfully avoided the efforts of a crowd intending to force him to be king after he fed the 5000⁶. His teaching included such gems as “Blessed are the meek and the merciful and the peacemakers,”⁷ and “Do not resist and evil doer.”⁸ He indicated no interest in opposing the empire when he was asked about paying taxes and replied simply, “Give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s.”⁹ And after that ride into Jerusalem, through the crowds shouting “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” and waving palm branches and spreading their cloaks on the ground before him, Jesus did not rejoice. After riding into Jerusalem through that welcome party, Jesus wept over the city, saying, “If you had only recognized the things that make for peace!”¹⁰

Jesus knew how inappropriate a royal welcome was for him. And we who know the ending of the story also know the irony over which Jesus wept. Jesus’ alleged kingship would be a central player in his trial, his suffering, and his death. When Jesus was brought before Pilate, the charge brought against him was this “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”¹¹ So Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus’ answer? “You say so.”¹² Jesus claimed no kingship before Pilate.

Then Jesus is handed over to be crucified and brought to the governor’s headquarters. We are told that the soldiers of the governor treated Jesus with contempt, taunting him by putting a royal robe on him, twisting some thorns into a sardonic crown for his head, and paying mock homage to the great almighty “King of the Jews.”¹³ It was this title that was written on the inscription nailed above his cross. “The King of the Jews.”¹⁴

The onlookers observing the crucifixion – the soldiers, the chief priests, even the others being crucified with him taunted him and yelled out to him things like, “Hey, if you are the great king of the Jews, then save yourself.”¹⁵ I can imagine a number of those who had been waving palm branches only a few days earlier standing by, dejected, watching their hopes of a new day literally dying before their eyes saying quietly, “yeah, come on, save yourself. And us.” The events surrounding Jesus’ passion did not match our idea of a great king. A great king is one who proves himself worthy of such distinction. A great king would not allow himself to be

⁵ Matthew 8:30-37; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39

⁶ John 6:15

⁷ Matthew 5:5,7&9

⁸ Matthew 5:39

⁹ Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26

¹⁰ Luke 19:41-42

¹¹ Luke 23:2

¹² Matthew 27: 11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3

¹³ Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20; Luke 23:11

¹⁴ Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19

¹⁵ Matthew 27:39-44; Mark 15:25-32; Luke 23:35-39

reduced to this kind of humiliation. A great king, if he was going to die, would at the very least die like a man, not to be taken without a fight.

Those of us who have been captivated over the years with the Lord of the Rings trilogy have seen such a king. By the time Aragorn wears a crown upon his head, he has proven himself many times worthy of being called the king – leading his people in battle against all odds, boldly going where all other men were afraid to go, fighting the powers of darkness and achieving victory for the side of goodness and light. Had Aragorn rode into Jerusalem, the palm branches, the Hosannas, the “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” would have been appropriate. But it wasn’t appropriate for Jesus. As far as we can tell, the title of king was never appropriate during Jesus’ life. It was ironic.

But Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday did not occur accidentally. There is little doubt that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. Most of the narrative in today’s gospel text relates the care with which Jesus has made the arrangements for this event, and allude to the fact that Jesus has planned the occasion in advance, arranging for the colt to be tied at a predetermined location and providing verbal signals for the disciples to use with the people watching it. For these reasons, some commentators have suggested that the best way of describing Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is with the paradigm of “street theater.”¹⁶

In this street theater, Jesus “lampoons the political powers” and enacts a subversive, “carnavalesque parody of kingship.”¹⁷ The whole scene is highly charged with royal undertones, and the crowds do everything expected for a victorious and triumphant national hero. The political powers got their feathers ruffled, and that is exactly what Jesus was going for. Jesus took on the mantle of king so as to turn imperial notions of power and rule on their head. In effect, he said to the crowds of Jerusalem, “OK, you want a king – so, go ahead, king me.” And then he proceeded to turn the entire idea of what a king should be upside down. In the words of commentator Charles Campbell:

[Jesus’] theater is a...piece of political satire. In his “triumphal entry” Jesus lampoons the “powers that be” and their pretensions to glory and dominion, and he enacts an alternative to their way of domination. Riding on a colt...Jesus comes not as one who lords his authority over others, but as one who humbly rejects domination. He comes not with pomp and wealth, but as one identified with the poor. He comes not as a mighty warrior, but as one who is vulnerable and refuses to rely on violence. Jesus here takes the role of a jester, who enacts in a...disorienting way a totally different understanding of “rule” and invites people to see and live in the world a new way.¹⁸

Today, monarchy – even benevolent monarchy – is no longer seen as the gold standard of politics. We have systematically rejected the notion of royalty and rendered it practically impotent, reducing it to the pages of history and fantasy and People magazine. But still we persist in singing of the “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords.” We give praise to the “King of glory” and speak of Jesus’ reign in his “Kingdom”. And we usually do so without any hint of the irony inherent in the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. And yet we are not lacking in “powers that be” and have no shortage of those who clamor for our allegiance and seek dominion over the masses. We may not call them kings, but that does not mean they do not

¹⁶ Charles L. Campbell, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 155.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.157.

seek to lord it over our lives. And I wonder if our insistence in continuing to refer to Jesus with the antiquated title of “King” is actually a way to domesticate his message and its claim on the lives we live today?

So far as we know, the earliest Christian confession of faith was simply “Jesus is Lord.” And so today, as we celebrate another Palm Sunday, and stand on the doorstep of another Holy Week, we have a choice to make. Do we stand with the crowd waving palm branches and welcoming a king whom we expect to follow into glory, only to be disillusioned? Or do we take the triumphal entry with a grain of salt and recognize it for the political satire that it is, and gird ourselves to follow Jesus not into glory, but through the darkness of Holy Week and into another way of living – an Easter life of sacrificial love, service, and peace? We stand at the beginning of Holy Week. And the question, as it always is, is where *do* we stand?

Benediction

We stand at the beginning of Holy Week. In these days, may our faith be strengthen, may our spirits be renewed, and may our allegiance to the way of Christ be rekindled, as we fix our minds on Jesus, remember, and follow. Amen