



When the King Rides Into Town

Palm Sunday

This morning is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of what we call Holy Week when we remember the final week in the life of our Lord. It was a week of tremendous emotion. There were ups and downs. The highs were very high and lows were very low. It all began with what we call the Triumphal Entry. This was one of the high points of the week. It was a day that had been anticipated for many years. The prophet Zechariah wrote of this day, **“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you, he is just and endowed with salvation; humble and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey”** (9:9) On this day, Jesus planned his own parade and entered Jerusalem as that king.

It was a triumphant day, but we know that this was at best a temporary triumph. There is a shadow over this day. In just a few days, this king would prove to be a tremendous disappointment, not just to the fickle crowd, but even to his own disciples. And that’s because they really didn’t understand what kind of king he was.

That’s a question that’s worth asking in regards to Jesus. What king of king is this? You and I say, **“He’s my King!”** But what does that really mean? Even on this triumphant day, there were some hints that he might be different than they thought. And our misconceptions about him can spell disaster. If we don’t understand what kind of king he is, he’ll disappoint us and we won’t be ready for his arrival.

There’s a great scene in the movie, *Anna and the King*. The king of Siam was feared by all his subjects. When he arrived somewhere everyone was expected to immediately hit the deck with their face to the ground. But there were problems in his kingdom; rumors he was a barbarian. So he decided to impress the Western world with a grand banquet. He wanted to show them that he was civilized and not a tyrant. He recruited Anna to train his servants to act like proper Englishmen. She dressed them in white tuxedos and taught them how to serve champagne on little trays. One day, as they were practicing this, the king entered the room and they all hit the deck, and their trays and glasses flew in the air! Anna had to convince them that for the time being the rules had changed in how to respond to the king of Siam.

In certain ways, Jesus will change some of the rules for us in this final week. What kind of king is he? What does he expect us to do?

WHAT KIND OF KING IS HE?

A. His preparations: Let’s read vv. 1-6. **“As they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, and said**

to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” you say, “The Lord has need of it”; and immediately he will send it back here.’ They went away and found a colt tied at the door, outside in the street; and they untied it. Some of the bystanders were saying to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission.”

Jesus and his disciples have just left Jericho. From there, they hiked up the Roman military road which was about 17 miles long and climbed 3,000 feet. They came to the southeast slope of the Mt. of Olives where there was a fork in the road. The left fork led to Bethany, the right fork led to Bethphage on the main road to Jerusalem.

Jesus sends two of his disciples on a mission. To make his royal entrance, he needs something to ride on. He wants a young colt or a donkey; seems hardly a way to make a royal entrance. I would expect a shiny stallion, but remember that Jesus has Zechariah’s prophecy in mind. Back then, kings who came in peace were known to ride donkeys. Jesus goes into great detail. He tells them what village to go to and how they will find a colt tied there. It won’t just be any colt but it will be a special colt no one has ever ridden. Jesus says to untie it and if someone questions you, say **“The Lord has need of it.”** I don’t suggest you try this next time you steal a car! This doesn’t mean they would know Jesus needed it, but that somehow lending this colt would be a service unto God. The two disciples go off and they find things exactly as Jesus said. Mark records all of this in great detail. Why so much emphasis on the preparations? Because it tells us something about the king.

He’s a king with perfect knowledge. Theologians use the word **“omniscience.”** He knows everything there is to know, and he knows it before it even happens. Some have said that he knew because he had made preparations beforehand, but even if that were true, there is so much here that he couldn’t have prepared for. He knows about an unridden colt tied to a door in a podunk town. He knows about the two men standing nearby, passing the day away, wondering why those two strangers are untying their friend’s young colt. He knows everything. That will either bring you great anxiety or great comfort, but this King knows.

The other thing we learn about this king is that he is humble and gentle. He knows everything, but he comes not on a white horse but on a young donkey. He comes in peace. As far as I know, there is only one time in the gospels where Jesus describes himself. He said, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you**

rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble at heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Mt. 11:28-29). That means that his way as a king is not to coerce or force, but to woo and invite. He doesn't demand that we fall on our face and cover like a dog who knows it's about to get a beating; but in his gentleness and humility he invites us to come near.

B. His entry: Once the preparations are made, the procession begins. **"They brought the colt to Jesus and put their coats on it; and He sat on it. And many spread their coats in the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. Those who went in front and those who followed were shouting: 'Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David; Hosanna in the highest!'"** (vv. 7-10).

Picture this: From the southeast slope of the Mt. of Olives they would have crossed over the mountain which provided a panoramic view of the entire city of Jerusalem. Then they would have wound down through the Kidron Valley and entered the Holy City. All in all, it would have been about a two mile trek. Because it was Passover, there were throngs of pilgrims on their way into Jerusalem. As they see Jesus riding on the colt, they recall that he has given sight to the blind and even raised Lazarus from the dead. They connect the dots with the prophecies in Isaiah and Zechariah. This must be the Messiah-King! So they make a royal highway by laying their clothes and palm branches on the road. This is like rolling out the red carpet.

Look at what they say: "Hosanna" means "Save now!" They were looking for salvation. The palm branches were actually a national symbol of deliverance. One hundred and fifty years earlier, Simon Maccabaeus had delivered Jerusalem and that victory was symbolized by waving palm branches. This was a powerful symbol of freedom for the Jews. "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David." They believed this was David's promised successor who would restore the kingdom to Israel.

Make no mistake, they believed this King was strong enough to save and they were expecting a regime change. They were under the boot of Rome. They had been reduced to nothing more than a puppet state. They had no king because the Romans wouldn't let them have one. They could still appoint a high priest, but the Romans said, "We have to approve whoever you choose—and to make sure your high priest never gets any ideas about leading a revolt, we're going to keep the robes of your high priest locked up in our guard towers. You can get them out for Passover and other holy days, but only if you behave yourselves. And in case the people who come to the temple get any crazy ideas, we've built a giant fortress called the Antonia on the side of your temple, your most precious building. Now your temple will fall under the long shadow of our fortress. When you come for Passover, look up! On the rooftops, all around the temple, we've got Romans soldiers with their spear tips gleaming in the sun. There are 600 soldiers on duty there at all times. This fortress has 4 giant columns that are 14 stories high. We can look down on your temple to make sure nothing gets out of hand."

But despite the crippling political power of the

Romans, the Jews had not given up hope. The ancient prophecies said a Savior would come—a king would someday ride into Jerusalem to deliver God's people from the ungodly. Though Zechariah said he would come in humility, he also said he would **"save them in that day, as the flock of his people"** (Zech. 9:16). They now believed Jesus was the One.

C. His reception: But then something odd happens. Look at v.11. **"Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late."** Jesus doesn't go to the Roman fortress. He goes to the temple. He doesn't go to the heart of enemy occupation. He doesn't go to the barracks to drive out the ungodly. He goes to the place that's the heart of the Jewish religion.

And when he comes to the temple, there is nothing but a deafening silence to greet him. This is hardly what I would call a king's reception. The throng of worshippers is gone. And where are the religious leaders? Don't they know this is their king? He goes there and looks around like a king inspecting his city. Then, almost as soon as he arrives, he makes a U-turn and returns to Bethany with the Twelve.

It's interesting that in Matthew's gospel, Jesus cleanses the temple at this point. He turns over the tables of the moneychangers and says, **"My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a robbers' den"** (Matt. 21:19). In Luke's gospel, Jesus wept over the city at this point. He wept because they were headed for destruction and, as he said, **"they did not recognize the time of their visitation"** (Lk. 10:41-44). In all of this, you get the feeling the King doesn't like what he sees.

As the people had prayed for years, the Messiah did come at Passover to judge the ungodly. But to their shock, he started with them and not the Romans. It's like he was saying: "Who's violating the Holy Place more—the Roman soldiers who stand in a tower with the high priest's garments locked inside, or the temple priests who are curiously absent from their post, and the moneychangers who have made it into a den of thieves, and a city who didn't see the time of their visitation?"

When the King rides into town, you just never know where he might go or what he might do. We think he's got to be for US and against "those evil people." But in reality, he's against sin, wherever he finds it. Because sin destroys people and separates them from God. But he starts with his own people. When the King rides into town, he finds evil things right in the heart of his people. He finds it in the things we accept, in the things we don't think a thing about. Peter said, "Judgment begins with the family of God." Today we know that the temple, the place where God's presence is, is in his people. Paul says to the church, **"Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you"** (1 Cor. 3:16)?

So I wonder, when the King rides into town and heads first to our house, what will he find?

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO HIM?

A. We should obey him: It's significant that the majority of the verses in this passage deal with obedience. Jesus sends out two of his disciples so they could fetch him

an unriden colt to ride on as he enters the city. When Mark says he “sent” them he uses a formal word as if they were being officially sent out as his representatives. His perfect knowledge of every detail enforces a sense of authority. As King of kings, who knows exactly what we’ll encounter and paves the way for us even before the events happen, he sends us and we go. We might be tempted to question him “Untie a colt? Why would I do that?”

But when the King rides into town, will he find obedience? He may send you out to get a cup of coffee at McDonald’s and sit there until someone comes along you can share the Gospel with. You might be their answer to prayer. He may send you next door to cut your neighbor’s lawn. Last weekend our Millbrae campus was not able to meet at Mills High School because the theater was being used for a school play. It seemed like a bad thing but then they got this idea to take that day and instead of meeting somewhere for church they would go out and serve in the community. Some of them took lunch to the police department. Others worked to beautify a public school. Still others fed people at a homeless shelter and another group took food to day laborers. Jesus said, **“You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 5:14,16). I think if the King rode into Millbrae last Sunday, he would have been happy with what he saw.

When the King rides into town, will he find obedience? Will he find his people doing what he told them to do?

B. We should embrace humility: But he also cares about how we do it. He rode into Jerusalem on a symbol of humility. The way of Jesus is the way of gentleness and humility. He comes in peace. He comes with open arms. A few days later he washed his disciple’s feet in a stunning display of humility. He said, **“If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you”** (Jn. 13:14-15).

Throughout history, the failure of Christians to grasp this idea of humility and gentleness has been disastrous. Think about the Crusades where thousands of Muslims were slaughtered under the banner of a cross. Think about the arrogant dogmatism with which many Christians operate towards unbelievers today. Think about the gospel of health and wealth where Jesus rides not on a donkey but in a limousine with all the trappings of status and power. Think about Christians that are so invested in a political agenda that they fail to see where their faith in Christ ends and their faith in their politics begins.

What do we need to do when we get caught up in all of this? We need to go untie the colt. We need to place our garments on its back. We need to watch as Jesus sits on it and rides it into Jerusalem. At times, I think we’re embarrassed about that. We want a Jesus who snaps his fingers and solves our problems, not one who rides in on a colt. We want a Jesus who went into Jerusalem and conquered his foes, not one who died on a cross of shame.

Taylor University is a Christian college in Indiana. Years ago, they were pleased to learn that an African student, Sam, was going to be enrolling in their school. He

was a bright young man with great promise, and the school felt honored to have him. When he arrived on campus, the President of the University took him on a tour, showing him all the dorms. When the tour was over, he asked Sam where he would like to live. Sam replied, “If there is a room that no one wants, give that room to me.” The President turned away in tears. Over the years he had welcomed thousands of Christian men and women to the campus, and none had ever made a request like that. But that’s a demonstration of humility: If there is a room that no one wants, give that room to me. If there is a job that no one wants to do, I’ll do that job. If there’s a kid that no one wants to eat lunch with, I’ll eat with that kid. If there’s a piece of toast that’s burnt, I’ll take that piece. If there’s a parking space that’s far away from the church, I’ll park in that space. If there’s a sacrifice someone needs to make, I’ll make it.

When the King rides into town, will he find humility?

C. We should worship him: I also wonder if he will find genuine worship. There are some clues in this story about how to do that. The people in this passage sacrifice in their worship of the king. Someone gives a colt; others lay their garments out. Scripture speaks of offering to God “sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.” Sometimes it really is a sacrifice. We don’t feel like it. We have other things to do. But we do it anyway, because he’s the King whether we feel like it or not. And the more we do it, the more we feel like it.

No one is named in this passage but Jesus. Normally when Jesus sends his disciples somewhere he names them, but here they’re anonymous. It’s like all his servants fade into the background. Everything is focused on him. This is one of the most beautiful things about worship. When we give true worship to the king we have no need to stand out; it’s far more fulfilling to have him at the center.

Perhaps the greatest thing about the worship in this story is it’s so full of spontaneous joy. Jesus carefully planned how he would enter the city, but he couldn’t have planned for the people to respond as they did. Last year at an awards presentation in Washington, D.C. something happened that can only be described as unashamed joy. It was even more powerful because it included people from different cultural backgrounds—a saddle maker from Idaho, a Brazilian street dancer, a leader of the music liturgy of an Ethiopian church, an Iroquois choir, a bluegrass band, a quilter from Alabama, and a Korean dancer from New York. After almost three hours, it was time for a curtain call. As the host reintroduced everyone, the jazz band played *When the Saints Go Marching In*. That’s when something happened. The audience rose to its feet to acknowledge the winners. But as they clapped in time to the song the performers onstage began to dance. The band got louder, and kept playing, and playing, and playing. Onstage, the performers formed a conga line, led by one of the jazz musicians. The invisible line between performers and audience evaporated. It had turned into something like a revival meeting.

Mark Judge was a reporter there and said, “I’ve been to hundreds of concerts over the years. I’ve never seen anything like what happened on that stage. It was the most

unselfconscious explosion of bliss I've ever seen... the people onstage were not hamming for the crowd... They were as lost in abandon as we were. I wouldn't be surprised if they had forgotten we were there. This was a spontaneous eruption of happiness. After about thirty bars of saints marching in, the host shut things down. I honestly believe the band could have played for an hour and no one would have moved for the exits. Staggering outside, I heard a woman say she was 'swimming in joy.' I myself was speechless. Then I heard someone say, 'I hope there was someone from the media there.' I thought of saying that I was in the media. But then I had the decency to admit there were times when language failed. Like everyone else, I just wanted to stay inside the joy."

That, of course, was not exactly worship, but it was like worship in certain ways. There are times in worship when something happens we never could have planned. Every once in a while, as we pray and sing and preach, we experience an unselfconscious explosion of bliss and we find ourselves living or even swimming inside the joy of our King. When you read the things that Jesus said to his disciples in this last week, he said a lot about joy. He said things like, **"You now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you."** He also said, **"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full"** (Jn. 16:22; 15:11).

When the King comes to town, will he find that kind of joyful worship?

CONCLUSION

You just never know where this King might go or what he might do. We know he's going to judge the ungodly, but that might just not be the people we think. "Judgment begins with the family of God," Peter said. When the King rides into town, will he find obedience? Will he find humility? Will he find joyful worship?