

WHO IS THIS KING?

MATTHEW 21:1-11; PHILIPPIANS 2-5-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

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Have you ever read a novel or watched a movie more than once? What about a book or a movie where you know the story will take a sad turn at the end? What about, in particular, a book or a movie where you know that the hero dies?

How does knowing what will happen affect how you experience the story the second time around (or the third, the fourth, etc.)? How do you feel when we know which way the story will go?

I often find myself in two minds when I have this experience.

On the one hand, I tend to experience the story anew each time. Even when I know that a favourite character will die, even when I know that the city is going to fall, even when I know that the guy isn't going to get the girl, even when I know that the patient isn't going to recover, I find myself hoping for the happy ending throughout. *Even when I've read or watched it before and I know how the story ends!*

On the other hand, when I *know* that something bad is coming, it affects how I read the earlier parts of the story the second time around. Even though I'm hoping that things won't turn out the way they seem to be going, the way I *know* they will go, I know, in the back of the head, that there is sadness lurking around the corner, that there is evil just around the bend, that the character whose skin I have been living inside of, will face a great trial, that they will suffer, or even die.

This is how I feel each year about this time. Palm Sunday is a time of celebration. Our text today narrates a scene of joy, of jubilation, of expectancy and hope.

The palm branches echo earlier, happier times, when Israel's kings ruled in Jerusalem.

The loud “hosannas,” which literally meant “save us” but also were used for more generic expressions of praise for the king also call to mind ancient glories and the fulfillment of long promised hopes.

This is a celebratory text.

(It’s probably also even a subversive one—many have suggested that this scene is a kind of “street theatre” performance whereby Jesus is directly challenging the Romans about what true power and kingship looked like.

This is worth thinking about from in present-day terms, too. I often wonder what our popular culture says about what we value or are attracted by. Some of the most wildly popular TV shows out there today, whether it is the cynical calculating world of American power politics portrayed by Netflix’s hit series *House of Cards* or the brutal fictional world created by the makers of *Game of Thrones*, celebrate the same sorts of people and behaviour and understandings of the nature and value of power. It is the wealthy, the cynically pragmatic, the violent, the ruthless, the selfish that get ahead.

In other words, a lot like the Roman Empire that occupied the Jerusalem that Jesus entered on Palm Sunday.)

At any rate, I have rarely been able to read this story in a celebratory way. *Because I know what is coming.*

Each year, I find myself half-heartedly hoping that maybe this will be the year where Jesus doesn’t have to die, maybe this will be the year where the people do not refuse the path that leads to peace, maybe this will be the year that the people do not put to death the light of the world.

But, of course I know what is coming.

We all know what is coming.

We know that these glad and expectant “hosannas” will turn into angry “crucify him’s.”

We know that somewhere along the way things will take a turn. Many of the very people who hail Jesus as their coming king at the city gates will in a few short days be crying out for his blood.

Why?

Well, at the centre of this big story that marks the high point of the Christian year is a massive collision between what people want and expect from their God and what they get.

N.T. Wright calls this text from Matthew “an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God’s answer.”¹

The people in Jesus’ day knew what they wanted from God and from God’s anointed one. They wanted a mighty king to rule from Jerusalem. They wanted the Romans out and a Jewish king in. They wanted punishment for their enemies—all those who had held their boots over their necks for long years. They wanted a righteous king and the fulfillment of all they had hoped for since they had been exiled centuries earlier.

But this king is... different. Unpredictable. Unsettling. Surprising!

This king walks the dusty pilgrim path up to Jerusalem at Passover time, fully aware of the eager crowd waiting expectantly for him to do what they’ve been wanting him to do and...

... asks for a donkey to ride on.

Not a warhorse, as befits a conquering hero, but a donkey, in fulfillment of the vision of peace declared by the prophet Zechariah:

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.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 69.

and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and 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.

This king will not conquer the Roman occupiers of his people Israel, nor will he assume the throne of David as so many were hoping he would do. At least not in the way they expected.

This God will bring peace not through the sword, but, only a week later, through laying down his life for his friends... and for his enemies.

This God will defeat evil, but, at least initially, by subjecting himself to its worst.

This is not the sort of king the people want. Not even those closest to Jesus.

Only a few short verses prior to this passage James and John are jostling for who will get the position of power and influence once Jesus sets up his kingdom in Jerusalem.

Despite Jesus repeatedly hinting or explicitly stating that he is going to Jerusalem to die, the disciples either misunderstand him or refuse to believe him.

Nobody wants this kind of king.

It is easy—too easy—to look back at those back in the first century who misunderstood the nature of Jesus’ kingdom and kingship, and think, “How could their expectations have been so off the mark?”

But one of my deepest convictions is that the story of Scripture is our story, too. It is a mirror that shows us ourselves.

If we simply hear this story as a story about *them* and not about *us*, we will have not heard well. We do not read Scripture merely for *information* but for *formation*.

And one of the lessons we ought to learn from our story today is that we are not so very different from those eager throngs of expectant worshipers on that first Palm Sunday.

As 21st century Christians, we, too, have our expectations.

We, too, have our clear ideas about what God is supposed to do, how God is supposed to work.

Here, on this Palm Sunday, it is appropriate to ask the questions: What are we expecting of God? Do our expectations of God reflect our preferences or God's purposes for the world?

Right near the end of our gospel text, we read these words:

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "**Who is this?**"

This is a question that has resounded down through the ages, even from before Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Who is this?

And we are still asking this question all these years later.

Who is this king? Why doesn't he behave in more kingly ways? Why doesn't he act more God-like?

Why doesn't he fix my problems? Why isn't he there for me when I need him?

Why does this king ask so much of me and seemingly give so little in return? Why does this king sometimes leave me with more questions than answers? Why does he make me squirm? Why does he provoke and unsettle me?

Why won't he leave me alone? Why can't I have this king on my own terms?

Here's what N.T. Wright says in his commentary on this passage:

People turn to God, notoriously, when there is something they want very badly. Of course, that's like finally deciding learn to use a telephone when you urgently

need to call an ambulance; it would have been sensible to find out how to do it earlier, when it wasn't so important. But that's how people are. Church attendance goes up in leaps and bounds when major crisis strikes—a war, say, or an earthquake [*there were reports of a major spike in religious observance when the tsunami hit southeast Asia in December, 2004*]. Suddenly everyone wants to ask the big, hard questions. Suddenly everyone wants Jesus, in terms of this story, to ride into the city and become the sort of king they want him to be. Give us peace now! Pay my bills, and hurry! Save the life of my sick child, and do it right away! Give me a job by this time tomorrow! And—perhaps the most common prayer of all—Help!²

These aren't bad prayers. That's not the point here at all. It's not as though Jesus *doesn't* care about our sick child or our employment prospects or global conflict. Far from it!

There is mystery here. We don't know why our prayers aren't answered, particularly when we are quite convinced that what we want is pretty much squarely in the middle of God's will.

But the point is that we tend to frequently want God on our terms.

We want what we want from God when we want it, and we're not prepared to wait or to suffer or to invest much in terms of spiritual discipline in our journey with God.

We want God to validate our assumptions, our preferences, our view of how the world works.

What Palm Sunday does is give us God on God's terms.

But it does more than just show us who our king is. It invites us to imitate him.

Our other text from this morning Philippians 2:5-11. In it, Paul quotes what many scholars believe to be one of the oldest hymns or poems of the church, probably written only a few years after the first Easter.

² Wright, 68.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- 6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;
- 7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
- 8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

In your relationships with one another, in your families, your workplaces, your communities, your *lives*... have *this* mindset.

Or, as Jesus said in his reply to the disciples who were jostling for positions of influence in his kingdom,

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”
(Matthew 20:27-28)

This is our God; therefore this is our call.

So, here, on Palm Sunday, we along with those Jerusalem crowds encounter a God who does not dance to our tune. This king is unlike any other.

This king does not give us what we want. But, as the events of the next days and weeks will make clear—and as we will spend our whole lives trying to understand and apply and embrace—this king does give us what we need.

Thanks be to God.

