

The King Has Come

Matthew 21:1-17

This Palm Sunday morning we're going to take a break from Luke's Gospel and instead we're going to look at Matthew's account of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Now, just as at the start of a race, someone fires a starting pistol, and that sets everything else in motion, this triumphal entry was the event which triggered all the other events leading up to Easter. So with Good Friday and Easter Sunday ahead of us, we're going to start our Easter week by taking a look at this event – and just consider why it had the impact it did.

Read Matthew 21:1-17

In CS Lewis' *The Last Battle*, which is the final book in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, one of the central characters, is an ape, called Shift. And Shift fancies himself as someone important. And to get his way he manipulates a harmless donkey, called Puzzle, into dressing up in a lion costume to make people believe Puzzle, the donkey, is Aslan, the Great Lion. And Shift then acts as the mouth-piece for this fake Aslan, issuing decrees that are entirely in his own favour, and the animals and dwarves of Narnia fall for it. And there is one scene in the book where Shift, the ape, is sat outside the little stable containing Puzzle the donkey dressed as a Lion, with all the good animals of Narnia, terrified and cowed into submission standing around him. And Lewis describes Shift as looking 'ten times uglier' than he used to 'for now he was dressed up. He was wearing a scarlet jacket which did not fit him very well... he had jeweled slippers on his hind paws which would not stay on properly... [and] he wore what seemed to be a paper crown on his head.'

The ape thinks he's a king, while all the time he's nothing but a charlatan, a fake.

And when you get your eye into what is going on with Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, and the kind of claims Jesus and Matthew are making through this event, either it is complete lunacy – it's just a first century equivalent of an ape with a paper crown on his head pretending he's someone special, or Jesus really is the king unlike any other who has ever reigned. And whichever one of those it is, has profound implications for your life.

The King Has Come

As Matthew sits down and writes about this event, he recalls the prophecy of Zechariah written some 500 years before: v5 – and this is a quote straight from Zechariah 9:9, 'Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your king is coming to you." And though it's only about a mile or so between Bethphage and Jerusalem, this short little journey is full of stuff that makes the incredible claim that Jesus, a travelling rabbi-come-preacher, the adopted son of a carpenter, is coming into Jerusalem as King.

Firstly, of course, is the location. Jerusalem was the city of David – the psalmist calls it, 'the city of the great King' (Ps 48:2). This is the place of David's throne. This is the symbolic seat of Royalty. It's currently under Roman occupation and Jesus is entering into it in procession.

Then there are the detailed lengths Jesus goes to get a colt, the foal of a donkey. Now given that Jesus has proved himself more than happy and able to walk miles

on foot – why the sudden need to get a colt? Why all the detail about telling the disciples where to go and what they'll find when they get there? Well, Jesus knows what He wants. He's directing all this. And He is deliberately going out of his way to fulfill this prophecy of Zechariah's: v5: 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'

But it wasn't just Zechariah who predicted this. More than a thousand years before, Jacob, the patriarch, whose sons became the 12 tribes of Israel, as he was dying blessed and prophesied over the tribes of Israel. And this is what Jacob said of Judah, the tribe from whom David, and now Jesus were descended: 'The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes' (Gen 49:10-11).

And in orchestrating all this with the donkey and the colt Jesus is making just about as obvious a statement as you can get: 'I am the fulfillment of everything that was promised to Judah and to David, I am the one the prophets spoke of, I am the ultimate, the coming King.'

And then of course, there's the crowd. John tells us in his gospel that Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims for the Passover, and when they hear that Jesus is approaching, they pour out of the city to meet him, and there's the crowd of disciples travelling with Jesus coming behind him – and so there's this meeting of the two crowds, and it's party time. And look what they do: Matthew tells us, v8, 'Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road.' They strip off their cloaks and give Jesus the ultimate red-carpet treatment. There's a story in English history of how Sir Walter Raleigh took off his cloak and spread it over a muddy puddle so Queen Elizabeth the First wouldn't have to step in it. He humbled himself in deferential service before his monarch. But much more pertinent to this event with Jesus is the fact that in the Old Testament a crowd once did exactly the same with their cloaks for Jehu, the newly proclaimed and anointed King of Israel (2 Kings 9:13). And this is the crowd humbling themselves before their king.

But whilst some were spreading their cloaks, others were stripping branches off palm trees. Now you might read that and think, 'ah that's nice – events like this always look nice with a bit of greenery.' Which is true – but this isn't just about the aesthetics. You see, by this point in Jewish history, the palm branch had become a powerful national symbol. Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the ruler of the Seleucid Empire had invaded and massacred Jerusalem around 167BC. He dedicated the Jerusalem temple to Zeus, sacrificed pigs on the altar and used the temple cubicles as a brothel. But when the army of Judas Maccabeus liberated Jerusalem the people came out to greet their deliverers with, guess what, palm branches. And consequently this palm branch became a symbol of Jewish nationalism, of victory and of triumphing over the enemy. So when they're waving these branches they're saying our national deliverer, our victorious king, the one who has come to cast out our enemies is here.

Because none of this is lost on the crowd! They start calling out, v9, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest': words taken straight out of Psalm 118 – words which the rabbis taught spoke of the coming Messiah, coming in victory into Jerusalem to be greeted by the priests in the temple.

So this isn't some nice donkey ride down in the park. What's going on here is one statement after another that Jesus is coming as the King. So in Mark's account some of the crowd are crying out: 'Blessed is the coming *kingdom* of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!' (Mk 11:10). Luke records others crying out, 'Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord' (Luke 19:38) and John tells us still others were shouting 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, *even the king of Israel*' (John 12:13).

So is this man on the donkey, orchestrating all this, no better than Shift the ape and his paper crown: insane or at best deluded? Or is he the King who was to come? Now, if he was just claiming to be the king of some little corner of the Roman Empire you could dismiss that as having nothing whatsoever to do with you. But what is going on here has far wider and personal implications for every one of us.

Your King Has Come

You see, the context of Zechariah's prophecy here is not limited to Jerusalem or Israel. Just listen to Zechariah's words: Zech 9:9-11, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, *and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free.*'

This coming king has come to save and to rule and to set free, but to save and to rule and to set free not just Jerusalem, and not just the Jewish nation – but the ends of the earth. Which is why when Jesus enters Jerusalem He goes to the Temple and drives out all the merchants and money changers. Because the place where they were doing all that was the Court of the Gentiles, the court of the nations. The very place where people like you and I could go and pray and meet with God in His temple was occupied by a bunch of profiteering, racketeering criminals. And that is why when Jesus drove them out He said, v13, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer.' And that, as all His hearers would have known, was a direct quote from the prophet Isaiah, 56:7, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all peoples.*'

So as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the back of this young donkey, He's not just coming to *Jerusalem* as king, He's coming to the nations; and not just to different people groups – but to us as individuals. He is coming as your king.

And the question for each one of us this morning is, is He? Is He the ruling, reigning King over your life? Now we may smile at the quaintness of Sir Walter Raleigh laying down his cloak for his queen, but just ask yourself, if Christ is your King, how are you doing with regard your worship of Him? To what extent is Jesus the one before whom you bow in worship and adoration, the one who takes centre stage on the throne of your life, the one you give allegiance to?

Is He the one before whom you make your decisions, and conduct your relationships? Is He the one who calls the shots in the way you treat your wife and your kids, how you handle your business dealings and treat those who are under you and over you in the work place? And as you watch Him ride into Jerusalem as King, a city that ultimately rejects Him, it is worth considering whether there are any areas in your life where you are resisting and fighting and holding out against His rule, where you don't want to cede control but rather keep control in your own hands?

So as Easter week begins ask yourself, is Jesus my King or is He little more than a figure head monarch – comforting to have around, stick His head on your postage stamps, but the real power in your life lies elsewhere?

And the reason this matters is that you will never find the peace, or the settled contentment of heart, or the security and the joy you are looking for, either now or eternally, you will never live as you have been made to live, until you yield and surrender to the King who has come.

You see one of the startling things about this triumphant entry is Jesus' mode of transport. It's a donkey, of all things. Now what conquering king do you know of who rode into battle on a donkey? One of the things that makes British history so fascinating is that there were all these plots and battles between rival claims to the throne – but no wannabe king of England ever rode into battle on a donkey. If you did, you were asking to be killed. Or imagine you were a film maker, and you were making a western, you'd never put the hero on a donkey, would you? You might put the fat servant on a donkey – but not the gun-slinging hero. Donkeys aren't for heroes and they're certainly not for kings.

Putting a king on a donkey is like saying Her Majesty the Queen arrived in a shopping trolley, it's a beast of burden – that's just not how royalty travel. Shouldn't He come on a warhorse?

Well, if He had, He almost certainly could have carried Jerusalem with Him in revolt against the Romans. Instead, He comes on a donkey as a symbol of peace, he comes gently and humbly. He comes as the one who says, (Matt 11:28-9) 'Come to me, all 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 lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'

And it is only as you submit to His rule and His reign that you will know that rest in your soul that He speaks of.

But how can you get there? How can you know that settled rest that Christ's rule can bring to your heart?

Well, the answer to that is tied up with the reason why He does this all so publically.

He has come to die

You see, up until now in His ministry, no-one could accuse Jesus of being a publicity seeker. He's not exactly courted popularity or pursued the crowds. Time and again He's healed people and told them not to say a word; He's told the disciples not to tell people who He is. But here He is setting up the circumstances, creating the environment where this crowd proclaims Him King. And given the hostility towards Him of the Jewish religious elite, in the words of one commentator, that is like 'setting a match to a barrel of gasoline.'

So why does Jesus suddenly go public like this? Riding on a donkey, with crowds hailing him as king, seemingly threatening the powers of Rome and the religious establishment – He's asking to be killed isn't He? And the answer to that is, yes. He goes public now because the time has come for the Passover Lamb to be sacrificed. Christ the King had come to die.

Now, if you've been a Christian long enough, you've probably experienced the upside down truth, that when everything seems to be unraveling in your life and plans, later on you can look back and see that God has been working it all out for your good. And when the disciples looked back to Jesus' crucifixion and death – though they never understood it at the time – now, with hindsight, they saw that at the very moment when it seemed like God's plans were falling apart and the man they thought was their king was being tried and executed, God was in absolute sovereign control, working it all out. In Acts 2, when Peter preaches before the crowd on the day of Pentecost, he says, 'this Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed' (Acts 2:23). Though it seemed like everything was out of control, though it seemed as if God had abandoned us, though it seemed as if all His plans lay shattered like a precious vase at our feet, God was in control, this was all God's doing.

So when Jesus arranges for a donkey, and accepts the praises of the people and the welcome fit for a king, and thereby sets in motion the events that lead to His trial and crucifixion, it wasn't some unexpected, unforeseen consequence that it ended like it did. It wasn't as if it wasn't supposed to happen like this, and if only He had known how things would work out He would have taken the train instead. No, all the prophecies, all the planning, all the details were leading up to this point. And as the crowd sang out their 'Hosannas' and 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' from Psalm 118, Jesus knew, if they didn't, that that same Psalm cries out, 'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. *This is the Lord's doing*; it is marvelous in our eyes' (Ps 118:22-23).

And though now Jesus enters the city to songs and cheering, within the week He will be taken outside the city, and crucified. And when He is, it's all about His

Kingship.

At His trial Pilate asks Jesus, “are you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:33). When Pilate takes Jesus before the crowd he asks them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” (Mark 15:9), but the crowd would rather have Barabbas, a murderer, and their shouts of Hosanna have turned to cries of ‘Crucify! Crucify!’

Having handed Him over to be crucified, Jesus, the High King of Heaven’s coronation takes place in a Roman barracks, the barracks of the occupying army, as they beat Him and mock Him, and crown Him with a crown of thorns. The one before whom the crowds laid their cloaks is stripped of His clothing and mockingly robed with a purple cloak of royalty, and beaten about the head with a reed for a scepter.

His enthronement happens at the cross as He is nailed to the wood and lifted up to die as a public spectacle. And above His head, above the throne of the cross, is written the charge against Him: The King of the Jews. And at His feet, in place of a footstool, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders mock him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. *He is the King of Israel*; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him” (Matt 27:42).

But someone else is looking on that Good Friday morning. Someone else is watching the King of Heaven and Earth die. Someone else whose life is slowly ebbing away sees something all the religious leaders fail to see. It’s the thief crucified beside Him. And whilst he never had the theological education of the priests and the scribes, he sees what they all missed. He sees the King. With his colleague in crime, crucified on the other side, at first he joins in the mocking, hurling abuse at Jesus, but something stops him, something tells him inside ‘He is the King! He is the King! I am suffering because I deserve to suffer – but not Him.’ And fighting, struggling, lifting himself up for breath, his own death fast approaching, this dying thief puts his trust in the King, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). And Jesus replies, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” And within three hours, Christ the King was dead.

Why? Why was this the pre-planned outcome of this triumphal entry? Why does this triumph end in thorns and nails and wood and blood and death? And the answer is, because He loves you, because the King wants you to know what this crucified thief knew: rest for your soul.

That you might enter his kingdom

Now just ask yourself, how can a man, this thief enter the kingdom of God? How can a man live as he wants, spend his life snubbing his nose at what is right, and undergo a last minute, death-bed conversion and be welcomed by Jesus into eternity? Where’s the justice in that? Of course we might equally ask, where is the justice in allowing anyone – you and me included to enter into paradise? The thief knew he was guilty, and like him we are all guilty. So where’s the justice in letting the guilty go unpunished?

The justice is taking place on the cross next to the thief as Jesus, the King bears your sin and my sin and the thief's sin in His body on the tree. Justice is taking place as the King who knew no sin becomes sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. Justice is taking place as the King who loves you, humbles Himself even to the point of death.

The thief, and you and I, can know rest for our souls, the forgiveness of sins, His rule and reign of peace in our hearts, now and eternally, not because we are so spiritual or have achieved some exalted state of holiness, but because of what the King has done. The King who came, in Zechariah's words, bringing salvation with Him. You see Hosanna, the cry of the crowd, is not just some praise song. It means - Save Now O God! And that is exactly what the King has come to do, the King who deserves your all.