

“The Humble King”

Matthew 21:1-11

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In late 1989, events started to escalate behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe. In August of 1989 Hungary moved its troops back from the border with Austria; in September, 1000s of East Germans were escaping to the West; in October, East German leader Erik Honecker had resigned. This set up an unstoppable chain of events.

Then, on the night of November 9, 1989, tens of thousands of East Germans gathered at the Wall to cross into West Berlin. None of the authorities gave the order to use lethal force, and the border guards pulled back, overwhelmed. People by the thousands climbed on the Wall, streamed through it, and smashed against it with sledge hammers. In the days that followed, bulldozers opened up sections of the wall until many crossings were opened.

The outpouring of emotion happened because for so long, the people suffered under an oppressive government. They weren't free.

In the first century, the Jews weren't free. They suffered under oppressive Roman occupation. The two most important values in the Middle East were hospitality and avoiding shame, and it was deeply humiliating for Jews to live under the boot of a pagan, foreign power.

So during Jesus' earthly career, the Jews longed for God to send the Messiah, someone who could save them from the Romans, to kick out the occupying army and bring political freedom. One day, news came that the Messiah was coming to town, so everybody showed up to acclaim him.

What a day to be in Jerusalem—it's possible that millions of pilgrims were there to celebrate the Passover¹, crowding in now to see Jesus. It was a mob scene. People jamming the narrow streets, so many there you couldn't make your way through the crowd, like when the gates open to get into the Super Bowl, like the mob at Mardi Gras. Everyone there to make a sacrifice of a lamb, like the law made you do. dusty streets, Roman soldiers, camels and pack animals in their stalls, lambs for sale for the Temple sacrifices. The historian Josephus was there, and he said that hundreds of thousands of animals would have been slaughtered that week, and the blood drained off the Temple mount in pipes to dump in the valley below.²

What were the people looking for in Jesus?

¹ Historian Josephus estimated the number of Jews in Jerusalem to number over 3 million: Flavius Josephus. Geoffrey Arthur Williamson, E. Mary Smallwood, eds. *Jewish Wars*. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1981), 371.

² Ibid.

What exactly were people looking for in Jesus? Who did they think he was? After all, it was going to be only five days later, the same crowd would shout, "crucify him!"

Many of them must have been looking for a spectacular show. Jesus' reputation was big; it was only the day before he had done his biggest miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead. Now people were swarming around him. Remember the rock opera, "Jesus Christ Superstar"? At the Palm Sunday parade, everybody's lining up on the streets, and they're excited, and they say "Hey-sanna, hosanna, hey-sanna, Jesus Christ if you're divine, turn my water into wine." Later Herod sings, "Hey, J.C., won't you smile at me...prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool!" One thing, at least, the musical got right: plenty of people were only there looking for the spectacular.

People also wanted a political liberator, a savior from the oppression of the Romans. And Rome was hypersensitive to the possibility of political unrest. Only a couple years before Jesus was born, there had been a slave rebellion, and Rome condemned thousands of rebels and crucified them along the highway as a warning to anyone who might get similar ideas of freedom. And there had been riots in Jerusalem, insurgencies, and terrorists called zealots. The Bible tells us things were almost at a boiling point when the Passover feast was getting close, and the leaders were afraid of a riot. Like another "Jesus Christ Superstar" song has it: "Jesus Christ, if you're divine, throw out those bloody Roman swine."

That's what the people were thinking, some of them thrill seekers who wanted to be entertained, some of them political fanatics who wanted to throw the Romans out, and some of them the spiritually hungry who just wanted to see God's salvation.

On that tension-filled day, Jesus sent two of his disciples to get a donkey. Why did he do that? Matthew quotes the Old Testament to say,

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 'Say to the daughter of Zion [that is, to Israel], "Behold your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."' (Zechariah 9:9)

That's a quote from the prophet Zechariah. Jesus was acting out the fulfillment of the prophecy, and he was who he was by riding the donkey. He was saying, "Yes, I am the king." But he doesn't come on a war horse, a conquering warrior. He is coming to save. Today is the day of salvation.

And it's not only for Israel. Zechariah goes on to promise,

And *He will speak peace to the nations*; And his dominion [his kingship] will be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth (Zechariah 9:10).

Now the people's response to Jesus' coming helps see how they understood his importance. They shouted out,

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"
"Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9-10)

“Hosanna” meant, “God saves,” and it was taken from the Hebrew phrase *Hoshya na*, and that means “Save, please!” It’s was a cry for help— “O God, save us!” That phrase comes from the “hallel,” the section of psalms from 113 through 118 that Israel sang during the Passover.

The palm branches were an old tradition that came from the feast of the booths. This feast helped the people remember the years when they wandered in the desert after the escape from Egypt. It celebrated the great saving acts of God’s deliverance; waving palm branches would be like waving an American flag for us today, because it was also a sign of national deliverance. In fact, during the time of the Maccabees in 165 BC it became the symbol for the Jewish independence.

Over time, the meaning of Hosanna changed. Psalm 118:26, said, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” So Hosanna became more than simply a cry for help. It became a shout of hope and celebration, a shout that “salvation has come!” It means, “It’s here! Salvation is here! Salvation belongs to the Son of David, the king!” David was Israel’s greatest king. But even the greatest human king fell short, and we need the one “who comes in the name of the Lord.”

The prophet Malachi talked about the Messiah who would come,

The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:1).

When Jesus accepts the people’s praise and the waving of palm branches, he is saying that he is the Lord of the Temple who comes to bring the salvation of God. He’s saying he fulfills the vision of Zechariah, because he’s humble and gentle, and his offer to come to the house of God is global. Not only that, but he invites you to receive him as king.

A lot of people over the course of history have wanted to be the world’s kind of king. Almost nineteen hundred years later, Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II came to Jerusalem. He rode in with such pomp and show that they had to widen the Jaffe Gate to the Old City for him to ride in. After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a sign to the gate. It said, “A better man than Wilhelm came through this city’s gate. He rode on a donkey.”

See, in history, there have been a lot of men who wanted to be gods, but only one God who would be man. So, let’s touch specifically, again, on what kind of king he is.

Jesus is the humble king (vv. 1-11)

Look at what they say: the Son of David, a name for the Messiah. He comes in the name of the Lord, in his authority and power. But he’s not what the people were looking for. The last time they tried to crown him king, it was after he fed the 5000. A king who would put bread on the table would appeal to many people. So would a king who overpowers the nation’s enemies.

But Jesus wasn’t that kind of king. In four days, his enemies were going to drag him before the Roman governor Pilate, who asked him, “Then you are a king?” Jesus answered him,

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."
(John 18:36)

Jesus is the kind of king who wants to rule our hearts, one who sees the kingdom is hidden like the yeast in a batch of dough, that you can't see, but it infiltrates and changes everything, and king of a subversive kingdom.

He's the kind of king that doesn't just want outer conformity, but who wants a changed heart. Who doesn't just want dogged duty, but who wants our love. He's the king who makes the first last, and the last first. Who brings the kingdom not by being served, but by serving, and giving his life as a ransom for many. Who gets on his knees to wash his followers' feet.

Who doesn't want part of us, but all of us, our hearts, our hands, our heads, and our habits. Our time, our talents, our treasure, our tendencies. Like the song goes, "All of me, why not take all of me, take my hands, they're no good without you. You took the part that once was my heart, why not take all of me?" That's what he wants.

He's the humble king, gentle and riding on a donkey.

Jesus is the kind of king who clears away what keeps us from God

The next passage in Matthew tells how the first thing Jesus does when he comes to establish his kingly reign, is to bring judgment on what keeps people from God. Verse 12 says,

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. (Matthew 21:12)

They had their stands set up in the court of the Gentiles in the Temple, making it so that Gentiles who came from all over the Roman world had no place for them to worship God. they sold sacrificial animals at inflated prices, taking advantage of the fact that worshipers didn't have any other choice. Not only that in order to buy an animal for sacrifice you had to exchange money for special Temple coins, because that's the only money merchants would accept. It was so commercial you couldn't worship God any more.

Jesus was angry at those who exploit others who try to worship God. He's angry about all injustice and sin, and about whatever hurts people or keeps them from God.

What kind of king was Jesus, riding into the city on a donkey? Not a conquering warrior king, not a wonder-worker to wow the crowds, but a humble king. One who clears away what keeps us from God. One who wants us to bear fruit. One who loves you so much, he would rather die than to give you up.