

The True King
Mark 11:1-11

If you've been to a rock concert or a political rally you get the idea – Palm Sunday was the ancient equivalent of a mob of screaming fans. So, why the branches on the road? Today, we roll out the red carpet to celebrate our celebrities, but the Palm Sunday crowd had to improvise, sometimes even with their own clothes. Whatever it took, they did their best to give Jesus the royal treatment, and their cries only served to reinforce their expectations: "Hosanna; Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord."

And that's why everyone was so excited. They had come to the correct conclusion that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of David, and they looked back with longing to the time of David's reign, a time when the Kingdom of Israel was united and powerful and independent. That's what they wanted Jesus to do – to restore their nation to its proper place on the world stage. "Make Israel Great Again" might well have been their motto.

Now, Jesus had done His best to deflate their unrealistic expectations. Take for example His directions to the disciples at the beginning of this passage – they were to go and find a certain donkey in a certain place for Him to ride. His amazing ability to predict the situation and command the use of the animal made it clear that He could have chosen any sort of steed on which to ride into His capital city. But He did not choose a warhorse, so that He could tower over the crowd in pride and pomp. No, He would ride on a donkey, and not even a full-grown one at that. Far from cutting an impressive figure, as He rode into the city, His feet could probably have touched the ground.

Why did He do this? Jesus was obviously intending to act out the prophecy of Zechariah, written down some 500 years earlier: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass."

So, yes, the crowd was right to hail Him as their King. They were right to quote from Psalm 118 as they shouted "Hosanna," or "Save us," because Jesus was bringing salvation to them, just as Zechariah said. But it was a different kind of kingdom, a different sort of salvation that would come in a different way than they expected. Theirs would be a lowly King, a humble King. He would be a King on His own terms.

And if they had paid enough attention to that Psalm they were quoting, perhaps they would have picked up a few more hints of this truth. For the psalm weaves together strands both of triumph and tragedy, of opposition as well as victory, and in so doing points to many of the events of what would come to be known as Holy Week.

Yes, in verses 19 and 20 we see the King approaching His royal city: "Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, and I will praise the LORD: This gate of the LORD, into which the righteous shall enter." In verses 25 and 26 we hear the cries of the adoring crowds: "Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity. Blessed *be* he that cometh in the name of the LORD."

But between these verses we also see the futile opposition of the religious rulers in verse 22, a verse which Jesus Himself would quote later in the week: “The stone *which* the builders refused is become the head *stone* of the corner. This is the LORD'S doing; it *is* marvellous in our eyes.”

Yes, the psalmist knows that victory will only come after intense conflict: “All nations compassed me about: but in the name of the LORD will I destroy them. They compassed me about; yea, they compassed me about: but in the name of the LORD I will destroy them. They compassed me about like bees; they are quenched as the fire of thorns: for in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.” On Good Friday, Jesus would indeed be surrounded by swarms of His enemies, including some of the same people who had so loudly sung His praises on Palm Sunday.

And at the end of the psalm, we even get a hint of the radical way in which Jesus would ultimately win the victory: “God *is* the LORD, which hath shewed us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, *even* unto the horns of the altar.”

Yes, it was all right there in black and white for the Jerusalem crowd to see. If only they had paid attention to Zechariah's prophecy. If only they had taken seriously the rest of the psalm they themselves were quoting. If only they had listened to Jesus, they would have known He had come to be a Suffering Servant, a humble sacrifice for all His people. That's what they really needed, not a military Messiah.

But instead, by the end of the week, they had joined the throng of Jesus' enemies who were surrounding Him. On Good Friday they crucified the One for Whom they had been waiting for so many long centuries. In short, they allowed the disappointment of their unrealistic expectations to harden into opposition.

And that's where I wonder if we don't have something in common with them. For what exactly are our expectations of the Christian life? What do we think it really means for Jesus to be our King?

Oh, we know how shortsighted, how blind the Jerusalem crowd was to their true needs. And I think deep down we all know that we are sinners, and we know Jesus had to die in order to save us from our sins.

But that's all a bit beside the point. For remember, the problem the crowd had with Jesus wasn't so much in His role as Savior – they weren't thinking about that part of His ministry at all. No, their problem was the way that Jesus had come to be their king, the way that He chose to reign over them. They turned on Jesus not for what He did, but for what He didn't do. For when He came into Jerusalem He didn't do anything about any of their problems – not about their social problems like the Roman legions or the corrupt Temple leaders, not about their physical problems like hunger or sickness.

No, on Palm Sunday Jesus did not summon a rebellion. He didn't even barge right into the temple and start straightening out the religious leaders – no, that would have to wait for the next day. Instead, He just looked around at everything and left. At the end of the day, everything in Jerusalem, everything in Israel was exactly as it had been before He came in. The only thing left was the palm branches lying in the road, just as crushed and trampled as the people's feverish expectations.

In this political season, we know all too well what it means to be disappointed with leaders, don't we? We go to the rallies or hear the speeches, and we're just sure that this is the guy who is going to solve all our problems. But time and time again, once he gets into office, nothing changes. All that's left are the campaign buttons, the bumper stickers, the broken promises, and our disappointments.

So, I wonder if the same thing isn't true of the way we look at King Jesus. Yes of course, we come to Jesus as our Savior, and we are genuinely grateful that He has taken our sins from us. But are we any happier at the kind of king He is for us today than the Jerusalem crowd was back then?

For what are kings supposed to do? As military leaders, they are supposed to protect their subjects, right? Well, are we content that Jesus has guaranteed our eternal safety with Him in Heaven forever? Are we resting in His power to guard us against the deception and temptation of sin? Or, like the Jerusalem crowd, do we also insist on a whole host of worldly blessings – comfort and health and peace and prosperity? Are we satisfied with what He has graciously provided for us? Or have we let our disappointment cool our passion for Him?

And what else do kings do? They issue commands, and their subjects obey them. Well, what about us? Are we really enthusiastic about all the things Jesus would have us to do, all those things we've learned about in the rest of this chapter and in chapter 12? Do we really want to bear the fruit of true worship and devotion to God? Do we really want to render to God the things that are God's, to love God with all we are and all we have? Do we really want to forgive everything we have against everyone, loving all our neighbors in the same way that Jesus loved us?

For that is the other thing that a king does – he leads us, and we are supposed to follow him. Do we really want to follow Jesus any more than the Jerusalem crowd did? Are we really interested in living the sort of life that Jesus lived – the sort of life that gives instead of receiving, the sort of life that is lived not for the self but for the glory of God and the good of others?

For if Jesus taught us nothing else on Palm Sunday, He made that clear, didn't He? He did not come to rule over us with oratorical bombast or threaten us with violence if we don't get in line behind Him. He didn't wheedle us with all sorts of promises, pandering to our baser instincts of envy or greed or fear or our desire for revenge. He didn't come to the lead in the way that so many of our politicians do, in the way that so many of us try to exercise control over those around us.

No, He came not to seize a crown, but to lay down His life on a cross, to lead through humble service, to gain our allegiance through sacrificial, unconditional love. And He calls all who trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord to do nothing for Him or for others that He hasn't first done Himself.

The King is coming – but He will reign over us in His way, on His terms. Will we truly surrender to Him? Will we follow Him?