

“Seeing the King Clearly”

Introduction: Back in July 1959, Queen Elizabeth II came to visit my hometown of Chicago. It was the first visit ever to the city by a reigning British monarch. Living in our pastor’s home at the time was a five-year-old foster child who was excited beyond belief that he would get to see a real queen! So, as our pastor tells the story, the family packed a picnic and some chairs and headed downtown to view the motorcade, finding themselves a curbside spot right on Michigan Ave.

However, after the parade had rolled by, the little guy burst into tears. It turns out that he was looking for prancing white horses, a gold trimmed carriage, and a bejeweled lady waving a wand. He was looking for a queen that would’ve done Snow White proud but saw instead a woman, dressed like the ladies he saw every week at church, ensconced in the back seat of a bullet proof, black limousine. The poor boy had been looking for the wrong thing and had missed the Queen entirely.

Palm Sunday is about a parade that involved another royal figure, a king named Jesus. “See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,” declared the prophet Zechariah in anticipation of this day. But despite the fact that the streets leading up to Jerusalem were lined with adoring pilgrims, many missed the coming of King Jesus because they, like that little boy, were looking for the wrong kind of king. How can we see the right One?

Often, on this day, we look ahead to holy week and the events surrounding the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Today, I’d like us to look back and take a look at some of what took place in the week leading up to this day, in order that it might help us see more clearly the nature of the kingship of the one who came riding into Jerusalem on that donkey.

I. A Third Prediction

A. As the week began, Jesus and his disciples were making their way up to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. They were joined by increasing crowds of pilgrims also making their way to the holy city. At some point, Jesus had a word, just for his disciples it seems, about what lay ahead:

Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” (Mk. 10:32-34)

B. This was actually the third time Jesus had outlined these coming events for his disciples, and they still didn’t know what to do with it. The first time he’d said it Peter responded by rebuking Jesus (8:31-33). That must have been an uncomfortable moment to witness! Peter, it seems, didn’t want Jesus to think in such negative terms. After all, what kind of Messiah would let himself be mocked, spit upon, flogged, and crucified?! Jesus, in a strong retort, told Peter that he needed to get beyond thinking in merely human terms. There was obviously more going on here than just another royal figure coming to town.

II. A Request for Greatness

A. Which is maybe why the next word we hear from the disciples, after this third prediction, was a request by James and John that they would get seats at the right and left hand of Jesus when he came into his glory (Mk. 10:35-37). Evidently, they had a sense that a conflict loomed, and assumed that Jesus would come out on top. So, they wanted to make sure they had spots of honor in this new administration. Interestingly, three years ago, when we heard Jesus call these two fishermen to follow him, Mark tells us that when they left their father in their boat, the hired men stayed behind as well (1:19f), indicating that this family might have been a little more well off in comparison to the other fishermen. Matthew also tells us that the mother of James and John got involved in making their request (Ma. 20:20), which suggests that she might've been used to her sons receiving special consideration.

B. When the ten found out about it, they were indignant. Either they thought it inappropriate, or perhaps they, too, wanted special consideration! The point of it all is in the response from Jesus:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mk. 10:42-45)

What does true greatness look like? It doesn't look like pursuing places of honor and comfort and power, and lording it over others. It does look like serving others. Not only would Jesus soon demonstrate this through the death he was going to die, but when the group did arrive in Jerusalem, Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples, modeling the way of a servant in a way they couldn't miss (Jn. 13:1-17).

III. Healings in Jericho

A. Their path next takes them through Jericho, seventeen miles east of Jerusalem and the last major stop along the pilgrim way. There, they bump into a man begging by the side of the road who shouts out to them. It turns out he was not only poor but blind. When Jesus came over and asked the man what he wanted, he said, "Lord, I want to see." Jesus opened the man's eyes and he fell in with the group. Certainly, this healing was an act of mercy on the part of Jesus. But could it have been something more, something like an acted parable revealing that to see this king clearly, he needs to open our eyes, and is most willing to do so if we would only ask?

B. As they began to pass through the city Jesus glanced up and saw a man who had climbed a sycamore tree. He did so, Luke tells us, because he was a short man (a "wee little man was he" says the song) and he wanted to see Jesus. His name was Zacchaeus. Jesus called him down and invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house. The crowd who saw all this happening was aghast. They muttered: "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner" (Lk. 19:7). We learn that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, and that he was wealthy, which likely means that not only was he a stooge for the Roman government but had extorted money for himself in the process of collecting taxes and managing other collectors. How could Jesus share a meal, a sign of intimate fellowship, with this crook, the crowd wondered?

C. But when Zacchaeus, who it seems wanted to break out of this lifestyle, responded to the grace of Jesus being in his home by giving half of his possessions to the poor and repaying four times the amounts he had cheated, Jesus declared: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk. 19:9f). This king in other words, had not come to make the life of the religious and social elites more comfortable. He had come to dine with tax collectors, converse with prostitutes, lay his hands on lepers, affirm women and children, and encourage people to love their enemies. The agenda of this king, and the nature of his kingdom, were radically different from what many had expected.

D. Before departing, Jesus went on to tell those listening a parable because, as he said, “he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once” (Lk. 19:11-27). It concerned a man of noble birth who went to a distant country to be appointed king. After a time, he would return. But in the meantime, his people were to be good stewards of all that he had entrusted to them. As Jesus unfolds the story, we hear that some are good stewards, and some are not. Along the way, Jesus makes the point that whatever he was going to do in Jerusalem, there would be more: The kingdom of God has an “already/not yet” nature. It has been inaugurated with his first coming; it will be completed when he comes again. In the meantime, having been renewed at his first coming, he calls us to take part in the renewal of all things until that return.

IV. In Jerusalem on the Donkey

A. And then we come to the king’s arrival in Jerusalem where he puts a final exclamation point on all that he had been saying and doing by choosing to ride into town on a donkey. A horse would have been the choice of a king who had come to make war against his enemies. But a donkey would have been ridden by one who had come, in humility, to make peace (cf. Zech. 9:10). His primary weapon would be a cross, not a sword, through which he would make peace for us with God, with ourselves, with our neighbor, and with creation.

B. And those palm branches that the crowd was waving as Jesus rode by? They were a symbol of Jewish nationalism, first used a couple of hundred years earlier to celebrate the Jewish victory over foreign invaders who had taken over the Temple. In a parade for a fellow named Simon Maccabeus, who had led the victory, Jews went out into the fields and cut palm branches to welcome him as conqueror. Sadly, a hundred years later, in 63 BC, Rome occupied the land and so the people were hoping for another victory, led, they assumed, by this Jesus, over this enemy. Shockingly, Jesus had come, it turns out, not to crush and defeat, but to love, this enemy. Palm branches that have been turned into crosses are a poignant picture of the kingdom that included people of every race, tribe, and language, not through conquest but through crucifixion.

C. As we put all of these puzzle pieces together, the picture of Jesus that emerges is that of a king who had come not to conquer his people’s physical enemies but their sin, not to be served but to serve, not to exclude sinners but to include them, not to make one nation great but to renew all things. Based on these events in the “week behind,” may God give us grace to see in the week ahead the amazing love the King of kings has extended to us, and calls us to extend to others.