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“‘Hosanna!’ or ‘Crucify Him!’?”
Matthew 21:1-9; Zechariah 9:9-10

☆ On Palm Sunday the crowds receive Jesus with shouts of praise: {Mt 21:9} **“Hosanna to the Son of David!”** {Mk 11:9} **“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”** {Jn 12:13} **“Blessed is the King of Israel!”** {Lk 19:38} **“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”**

✝ Five days later on Good Friday the crowds reject Jesus with screams of contempt: {Jn 19:15} **“Take him away! Take him away!”** {Mt 27:25} **“Let his blood be on us and on our children!”** {Jn 19:15} **“We have no king but Caesar.”** {Mk 15:13-14} **“Crucify him! Crucify him!”** This is a rapid and extreme change of attitude. What explains it? What might we learn from it?

The word **“king”** is the key to understanding.

⊙ It is Palm Sunday. The Lord and his followers leave the village of Bethany for the Holy City of Jerusalem, two miles to the west on the opposite side of the Mount of Olives.

They have been on the road for only a short while when Jesus tells two disciples to go on to {Mt 21:2; Mk 11:2} **“the village ahead.”** **“As you enter it,”** he says, **“you will find a donkey tied there, which no one has ever ridden, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.”** And so {Mt 21:7; Mk 11:7} **“They bring the donkey and the colt, throw their cloaks over [the colt], and Jesus [sits] on it.”**

Why does he do this? Matthew 21:4-5 explains: **“This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘Say to the Daughter of Zion, [that is, the people of Jerusalem] ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”** Christ Jesus rides in on a colt to **fulfill the prophecy of Zech 9:9, and to announce** (with his actions) **that he is Israel’s messianic king.**

His selection of animal also sends a two-fold message about the nature of his kingship.

✚ First, {Barclay} **“when a king [goes] to war”** in the Ancient Near East **“he [rides] on a horse, [but] when he [comes] in peace he [rides] on a [donkey]”** or mule. Zechariah 9:10 continues the prophecy: **“I will take away the chariots... and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations.”** The Lord Jesus is a peaceable king: he comes *in* peace, and he comes to *make* peace.

✚ Second, according to Zechariah 9:9 he comes in a **“gentle”** way. This Hebrew adjective ‘ānāw literally means *humble, meek, gentle*. It stresses the moral and spiritual qualities that develop within the righteous as they submit to YHWH in times of affliction and do not violently resist the enemies who oppress them. It is derived from a verb that means *to force submission, punish and inflict pain upon*. This reveals that the Messiah will be humble, meek, and gentle even while his enemies inflict punishment and pain on him. The Lord Jesus is a humble, suffering king.

Some in the crowd pick up on the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. But *what kind of a king are they looking for?*

☼ As Christ Jesus rides the donkey toward the Holy City {Mk 11:8} **“Many people spread their cloaks on the road.”** That is an extravagant gesture of honor, especially if the cloak is the only one you’ve got (as is surely the case for most of these people). This is the kind of thing you do only for your king or queen.

It is a great example for us. Have we {Wright} **“put our property at [his] disposal? [Do] we ...go out of our way to honor him, finding...our own... equivalents of cloaks to spread?”**

☹ Yet there is a disturbing undertone here. Scripture records one other occasion when Israelites did this. In 841 B.C. {2 K 9:13} when Jehu was anointed King of Israel, military officers **“took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, ‘Jehu is king!’”**

Jehu was neither peaceable nor humble. To be sure, the LORD God appointed him to remove Ahab’s dynasty, thereby cleansing Israel – but Jehu took perverse and inordinate pleasure in his task. He was unnecessarily brutal, going so far as to behead 70 of Ahab’s descendants and stack their severed heads in two piles by the city gate. Jehu did eradicate the worship of Baal, but he also promoted the worship of golden calves at Dan and Bethel. He was devoted more to gaining and consolidating his power than to reform and service to God.

Back to now: Do the crowds want Messiah to cleanse Israel by exterminating Herod’s dynasty (as Jehu exterminated Ahab’s dynasty)? It seems that this is what they are saying with the cloaks.

☼ {Mt 21:8; Jn 12:13} As they crest the Mount of Olives some spread leafy tree branches on the road. Others wave palm leaves. {Lk 19:37} **“The whole crowd... joyfully [praises] God in loud voices for all the miracles they [have] seen:”** {Mk 11:9} **“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”** {Mt 21:9} **“Hosanna in the highest!”**

It is a glorious act of worship, inspired by Psalm 118:25-26: **“O LORD, save us;”** (save is literally **“Hosanna!”**) **“O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.”** The psalm is used during the feasts of Passover, Weeks, and Booths, and these men and women have chanted it on previous journeys to Jerusalem. But they add some notable, politically dangerous lines that are not in the original: **“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”** (Mark 11:10); **“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”** (Luke 19:38); **“Blessed is the King of Israel!”** (John 12:13).

Theirs is a worthy example. *Are we ready to worship with enthusiasm? Are we willing to take a stand for Christ even at some risk to ourselves?*

☹ Yet there is an alarming undertone here. History records one other occasion when Israelites did this. In 142 B.C. Simon Maccabaeus secured Israel’s independence from the hated Seleucid Empire. As he

led a victory procession into Jerusalem the crowd welcomed him {1 Mac 13:51} **“with thanksgiving and branches of palm trees, and with harps, and cymbals, and viols, and hymns and songs, because [he] destroyed a great enemy...of Israel.”**

Simon’s realm was nothing more than a slightly improved, Jewish version of a standard, 2nd c. B.C. monarchy. It had nothing to do with God’s Kingdom.

Back to now: Does the crowd want Messiah to lead an army against Rome (as Simon led an army against the Seleucids)? It seems that this is what they are saying with their psalms and palm branches.

⊕ If this crowd wants Jesus to lead a violent revolt, they are disappointed.

He cleanses the Temple. This would please them except that instead of driving out the Romans he targets the patriotic Jewish **“bandits”** (that word is also translated {Mt 21:13} **“robbers”** or **“thieves”**) who use the Temple as a symbol and rallying point for their nationalistic cause.

{Mt 21:33-46; Mt 22:1-14} He claims that tax collectors, prostitutes, and even Gentiles will inherit the kingdom! {Mt 22:21} He advocates paying Roman taxes. {Mt 24:1-2} And the word on the street is that he has privately predicted the utter destruction of the Temple.

⊕ Now it is Friday, and the Son of David is on trial.

Pilate the governor asks, {Mk 15:2} **“Are you king of the Jews?”** **“Yes, it is as you say,”** Jesus replies.

When Pilate asks what crime he has committed, Jesus mysteriously answers {Jn 18:36} **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight But... my kingdom is from another place.”**

{Jn 18:37} **“You are a king!”** says Pilate. And Jesus declares, **“You are right in saying”** so.

Pilate asks the crowd, {Mk 15:9, 12} **“Do you want me to release...the king of the Jews?”** **“What shall I do with the one you call the king of the Jews?”** and they shout, {Jn 19:12} **“...Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”**

{Jn 19:14-15} **“Here is your king,”** Pilate says. **“Shall I crucify your king?”** The chief priests retort, **“We have no king but Caesar.”**

And at the crucifixion, Pilate posts this notice: {Mk 15:26} **“THE KING OF THE JEWS.”**

Kingship is on everybody’s mind, as it should be. Jesus *is* King.

But he is not a military conqueror who has come to free them from Roman rule and cleanse the land of Herodian pollution by force. Jesus is a peaceable, humble king who achieves God’s purposes God’s way, through acts of service and self-sacrifice. He fits the model of Zechariah 9, not the model of Jehu and Simon Maccabaeus.

It is easy to see why most first century Jews prefer their fantasy Messiah to the real one. But why do they refuse to adjust their expectations?

☆ The Jewish Talmud is helpful here. Though it was not assembled until the 300s, it records older teachings that were handed down orally. Some date from as far back as the 1st c. In one section {Tractate Sanhedrin: Folio 98a} rabbis debate the conditions for the Messiah’s advent. One says: **“It is written, ‘And behold the Son of Man comes on the clouds...’**

while elsewhere it is written, [he comes] lowly...riding on a donkey –” we know these as distinct events, Christ’s humble First Advent and his glorious Second Coming; but the rabbi explains it this way – **“if Israel is worthy, he will come with the clouds of heaven. If not, lowly and riding on a donkey.”**

◆ Bowing to a humble Messiah requires not only the forfeiture of their fondest dreams, but also the confession of unworthiness.

Which is easier to do? That – or holding out for a warlike, exalted, victorious king!

Palm Sunday and Good Friday are historic events, never to be repeated. Yet Christ Jesus keeps coming to us through his Word and the Holy Spirit, offering himself as Savior and King. And though he conquered death on Easter, the cross continues to define his kingdom.

◆ Even now, to submit to his Kingship is {Lk 9:23} **“to deny [oneself] and take up [one’s] cross daily and follow [him].”** That requires the forfeiture of false dreams about who the Messiah really is and what it means to follow him, and also the confession of our unworthiness.

Which will be our final word: **“Hosanna to the Son of David!”** or **“We have no king but Caesar. Crucify him!”**?