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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“KING FOR A DAY, OR FOR LIFE?”

Matthew 21:1-16

■ {Mt 21:9; Lk 19:36} On Sunday the crowds receive Jesus with shouts of praise: “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

{Jn 19:15; Mt 27:22-23} On Friday the crowds reject Jesus with shrieks of contempt: **“Take him away! Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!” “Crucify him!”**

The prevailing mood shifts from praise to denunciation in under a week. The adoring crowd degenerates into an ugly mob in five short days.

Hear the crowd shouting on Sunday: **“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”** (Luke 19:38). **“Hosanna to the Son of David”** (Matthew 21:9). **“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”** (Mark 11:10). **“Blessed is the king of Israel!”** (John 12:13).

? This Sunday crowd acclaims Jesus of Nazareth king of Israel, and rightly so. But what do they mean?

There is compelling evidence that most of the crowd imagines that Jesus is the Warrior King *par excellence*. In their eyes, he is a new and improved David who will crush Rome, cleanse Israel of Jewish sinners and foreign pagans, and reestablish their ancient kingdom on a grander scale, replete with invincible armies, unlimited wealth, and global prestige. But Jesus has never claimed to be *that* kind of king!

{I Co 1:26-29; Mt 9:12-13} This crowd does not expect Messiah to redeem sinners, so much as to purify the land of them; yet Christ’s kingdom is populated by **“the foolish ... weak... [and] lowly,”** riff-raff who are saved despite their badness. Jesus frequently eats and drinks with tax-collectors and notorious sinners, for **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick ... [He has] not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

{Mt 5:19-21; Lk 18:22-24} This crowd expects Messiah to enrich them (at least corporately) with gold and silver and jewels; yet Christ’s kingdom is not a place to accumulate material wealth. He commands everyone: **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... store [them] up in heaven.”** When a rich young ruler declines to **“sell everything ... give to the poor, and follow,”** Jesus laments, **“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”**

{Mt 20:26-28} This crowd expects Messiah to impose his iron will and reward them with coercive power; yet Christ’s kingdom does not accommodate those of us who would be ‘King of the Hill.’ When two of his apostles petition for the highest authority Jesus answers, **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”**

{Lk 6:27-28; Jn 18:36} This crowd expects Messiah to crush pagan armies; yet Christ’s kingdom has no use for Holy War. It functions by his command to **“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who**

mistreat you.” At his trial, Jesus will say **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest... my kingdom is from another place.”**

{Mt 16:24-25; Jn 18:36; Lk 9:23-24} He has repeatedly said: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves ... take up their cross and follow me.”** He has plainly taught: **“whoever wants to save their life will lose it, whoever loses their life for me will find it.”** He has clearly announced: **“Blessed are you poor ... you [hungry] ... you who weep now”**; **“woe to you rich ... you well fed ... you who laugh now.”**

Nevertheless, the Palm Sunday crowd fails to grasp the Good News of the Kingdom. **“Blessed is the king!”** they shout. **“Hosanna to the Son of David!”** **“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”** **“Blessed is the king of Israel!”** Their words are spot-on; but what they mean by them could hardly be further off the mark.

After three years of being misunderstood, Christ Jesus is finally able to deflate their false expectations by what he does – and does not do – following his Triumphant Entry.

■ As Matthew 21:12-13 describes it, Jesus enters the temple courts, **“[drives] out all who [are] buying and selling there,”** **“[overturns] the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves,”** and thunders: **“It is written ‘My house will be called a house of prayer’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”**

The vendors and moneychangers are outraged, but the crowd is exhilarated! From where they stand, the

Messiah has mustered his troops and taken back the Temple from the corrupt establishment.

All that is left to do now is to capitalize on this momentum. Surely, he will command his power and their righteous fury to overcome the pagan Roman usurpers and their traitorous Herodian lapdogs!

Instead, he just leaves, squandering this golden opportunity which they believe has been provided by Sovereign God! Israel’s glorious future crumbles before their eyes.

The crowd’s excitement and enthusiasm fizzle. Over the next few days it becomes obvious that Jesus will *not* meet their highest expectations, *not* fulfill their fondest dreams, *not* make their deepest hopes come true.

By Friday, it is a relatively simple matter for the Lord’s enemies to stir up a bunch of them to effectively scream, **“Crucify him!”** and to demand Barabbas’ release.

Barabbas has taken part in a violent rebellion against Rome. Barabbas has fought and killed for their freedom. Barabbas will do for them what Jesus will not.

They do not want a Savior who will die for them; they want one who will kill for them! Much less do they want a Savior who will invite them to die with him; they want one who will justify it when they kill their enemies.

On Sunday, the crowd makes Jesus king for a day. On Friday, they call for his death.

Thank God, we could never be so blind, so stupid!

☑ Fast forward to 1880 A.D., the year Dostoevsky publishes his masterpiece The Brothers Karamazov. In chapter 5 one of his characters tells a story:

Jesus appears in Seville, Spain in the 1500s, during the time of the Inquisition. He walks among the crowds, healing the sick and raising the dead.

The people instantly recognize him. Children shout “Hosanna!” and pave his way with flowers.

The Grand Inquisitor recognizes him, too, and orders his arrest. Face-to-face with Messiah, this worldly-wise churchman denounces Jesus for resisting Satan’s temptations in the desert.

‘You offer the bread of heaven,’ the Grand Inquisitor lectures, ‘but people want earthly bread. They will gladly follow anyone who fills their bellies. You should have turned the stones to bread.’

‘You offer humility,’ he scolds, ‘but people want signs and wonders. They will gladly believe anyone who dazzles them. You should have jumped from the high point of the temple.’

‘You offer freedom,’ he scoffs, ‘but people want a strong leader to rule with a firm hand. They will gladly receive salvation from anyone who compels it. You should have taken possession of the kingdoms.’

The Grand Inquisitor orders Christ to leave. His presence will disrupt the Church’s efforts to satisfy the crowds, who will surely turn on him as they did before.

It is only a parable, and it is not from Scripture. Yet it becomes reality among Christians when we remake Jesus to fit our false images. It is acted out among us when we

redefine God’s kingdom to look and operate like a better version of the world. It is repeated among us when we opt for earthly wealth instead of heavenly treasure, for control over others instead of service to them, for violence instead of peace, for comfort instead of obedience, and for pride instead of humility.

‽ Is the disconnect between Palm Sunday and Good Friday really so hard to understand? Are we so different from those first-century people, after all?

Thank God, Palm Sunday and Good Friday are not about the crowds. They are about Jesus! Amen!

{Php 2:6-8} These days are about God the Son,

**Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own
advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And, being found in appearance as a human
being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!**

{1 Co 1:18} This is sheer folly to most of the Palm Sunday crowd and the entire Good Friday mob in the first century, to the Grand Inquisitor in the sixteenth century, and indeed to all people in every time and

place **“who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God!”**

‡ The question is: will we shout **“Hosanna!”** and crown Jesus king for a day, only to reject him when he does not live up to our false expectations?

‡ Or will we crown Jesus king for life? Will we cling to him whatever the outcome, even if he proves that our hopes are worldly? Will we follow him wherever he leads?

Matthew 21:1-16 is the word of the Lord.