

The Return of the King

Palm Sunday

April 13, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Zechariah 9:9 (NRSV)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

¹When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he [Jesus] sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Longing for a king

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel's greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David's kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). *But . . .* four hundred years after David's death, Jerusalem burned. The Temple built by David's son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God's people were in exile. The king of Israel was dead. Indeed, to many Israelites it must have seemed as if God had abandoned them.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were "kings" only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, the Jews had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come, such as in today's passage from Zechariah. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in

Zechariah

Zechariah was a prophet working in Judah in the years immediately after King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home from exile in Babylonia. Thus, Zechariah is among the "post-exilic" prophets.

The book of Zechariah contains prophetic writings and visions aimed at encouraging the Jews to rebuild the temple and stay true to God. Zechariah brought them God's promises that the future of Jerusalem and the Jews was bright, and that, one day, Israel's king would return to Jerusalem in triumph.

Zechariah is one of the twelve "minor" prophets, whose writings close our Old Testament. It is important to realize that "minor" refers only to the length of these books, not their importance!

Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, when all the world would see that the Jews' confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God's king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God's kingdom, more than a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar.

The true King

In 27AD or so, one Jew, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, this Jew, named Jesus, had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the Kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy, not vengeance, and peace, not rebellion. Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike the prophets of old, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God's people. Not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, but Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God's people.

As Mark tells us in today's passage, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But, as he had done so often, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Hundreds of years before, the prophet of Zechariah told of God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. We may

Messiahs and Kings

There are certain keys to understanding the Gospels. One of these is the relationship between our understandings of messiah, king, and God. So, at the risk of being repetitive, we will hit this one again.¹

To a first-century Jew, Jesus' claim to be the Messiah was to say that he was God's King, the one who would inaugurate the coming of God's kingdom. This is why Matthew takes pains in the first chapter of his gospel to show that Jesus could lay claim to the house of David, for God's king was to come from David's line.

To a first-century Jew, claiming to be the Messiah was not a claim to be God. There was no sense of divinity in the Jewish understanding of the Messiah.

¹ See the pg 2 text-box in the March 16 study for more. It is available online at www.standrewcl.org.

have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but the crowds certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They waved palm branches¹, symbols of abundance and thanks.

The enthusiasm of the crowds was lost on no one. The Pharisees, the keepers of the old way, were obviously frustrated with the whole thing, for they muttered to themselves, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19).

However, Jesus knew that the enthusiasm of the crowds would soon falter. He knew that unless he gave up his course and abandoned the vocation given him by the Father, his confrontation with the Jewish leadership and the Romans would soon come to a head. But of course, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way to the cross. Thanks be to God!

Later in the week, after more confrontations with those who would not hear his words of warning, Jesus would be arrested, tried, and hung to die on a Roman cross, a humiliating death reserved for those who challenged Roman authority. Rather than the triumphant returning king entering Jerusalem, Jesus would wear a crown of thorns under a mocking sign, "King of the Jews." God's victory won on a cross. A world turned upside down.

¹ John is the only Gospel writer to tell us that the leaves are palm branches. Jews used palms in the Festival of Tabernacles, a time of harvest thanksgiving remembering the wanderings in the wilderness. See Leviticus 23:39-43.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Leviticus 23: 39-43 Palms are to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles, a time of thanksgiving 2 Kings 9:11-13 Cloaks are laid out at Jehu's anointing as king</p>	<p>Day 2 Zechariah 9:9-17 The King of peace; God scatters his people and gathers them back together</p>
<p>Day 3 Psalm 118 A psalm of thanksgiving for victory over Israel's enemies; quoted in Mark 9:9</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 21:1-11 Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem</p>
<p>Day 5 John 12:1-19 John's account is the only one to mention palm branches specifically!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is hailed as the returning king. But, only a few days later, the crowd shouts “crucify him!” What do you think may explain the crowds’ swift move from an enthusiastic high for Jesus to their abandonment of him? Are there parallels to our own Christian walk? There are times when our own enthusiasm and commitment to Christ are seemingly unbounded – we really *feel it!* But at other times, the reality of Jesus can seem remote and distant; we feel cold and spiritually dry. Why is this? What can we do to stay more constant in our relationship with God? How do you get through periods of spiritual dryness when you do not feel close to God?
2. For all Jews other than those living in Jerusalem, the great Festivals, like Passover, were times of pilgrimage. Thousands of Jews from all over Palestine would stream to Jerusalem to gather at God’s temple in unity and celebration as the people of God. What place do pilgrimages have in our lives? Are there pilgrimages you make? Many families make pilgrimages at certain holidays, gathering to celebrate together. Unfortunately, many of us have a tendency to exhaust ourselves in these “pilgrimages.” What ought to characterize our pilgrimages? The coming week leads us to holiest days in the Christian calendar: Maundy Thursday (the Last Supper), Good Friday (Jesus’ crucifixion and death), and Easter (Jesus’ resurrection). As we finish our pilgrimage to these days, how will you complete your preparation?