

Return of the King

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

March 25, 2018

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Zechariah 9:9 (CEB)

⁹Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion.

Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem.

Look, your king will come to you.

He is righteous and victorious.

He is humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt, the offspring of a donkey.

Mark 11:1–11 (CEB)

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, ²saying to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.’”

⁴They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it.

⁵Some people standing around said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?”

⁶They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. ⁷They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. ⁹Those in front of him and those following were shouting, “*Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*” ¹⁰Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!” ¹¹Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.

The King rides into Jerusalem. Hosanna!

We recently wrapped up a somewhat off beat series in my Sunday morning class. We looked at the three-fold office of Christ (prophet, priest, and king) using images and characters from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. One of the most important characters in this world of elves, dwarves, and hobbits is a man, a human, named Aragorn, the son of Arathorn. Though the reader doesn’t know it at first, Aragorn is the long-lost king of the humans, returning to claim the throne to which he is the rightful heir. That image alone can help us prepare for the true meaning of Palm Sunday. Here is the story of the return of Israel’s king.

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 traded one oppressor for another. The Jews 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 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, and 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. They all met a bad end.

The true king

In AD30 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 old, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike the prophets, 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 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 arriving 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. However, Jesus knew that the welcome 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 nonetheless, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way death, even death on a cross, to echo the apostle Paul (Philippians 2:8).

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." And yet, it was God's victory won on a cross. A world turned upside down.

Whom do we welcome?

When we sing our Hosannas and wave our palms, who is it that we welcome into our worshipping congregation? Do we, like the crowds in Jerusalem, see Jesus as no more than the fixer of all our problems? Do we worship Christ only if it works for us? If so, what do we do when our problems are not fixed to our liking. Some of the palm-waving

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.

crowd in Jerusalem would have still been alive forty years later to see the Romans burn the city and the people's temple to the ground. Sadly, some of us will have marriages that fail, relationships that crumble, and hopes that go unrealized.

So can we, instead, welcome Jesus as our Lord, our Master? Can we look ahead to Good Friday and see in it an invitation to love sacrificially? Can we see the rest of the story and find lasting hope?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on Palm Sunday

Monday, Leviticus 23: 39-43 Palms are to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles, a time of thanksgiving.

Tuesday, 2 Kings 9:11-13 Cloaks are laid out at Jehu's anointing as king.

Wednesday, Zechariah 9:9-17 The King of peace; God scatters his people and gathers them back together.

Thursday, Psalm 118 A psalm of thanksgiving for victory over Israel's enemies; quoted in Mark 9:9

Friday, Matthew 21:1-11 Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Saturday, John 12:1-19 John's account is the only one to mention palm branches specifically.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.
Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Jesus Comes to Jerusalem*

Beginning April 8 (No class on Easter): *Jewish History*, a six-week series with visiting faculty from UTD's Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies