

The King April 13,2014
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Matthew 27:27-38

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him.

37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"

44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice,

“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

THE KING ENTERS JERUSALEM

INRI.

You may have noticed those letters on the cross that hangs in the front of the sanctuary. Do you know what those letters mean?

They are the first letters of the Latin phrase that Pilate hung over the cross of Christ. The phrase read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

That’s the common theme in our lessons for today. Jesus in many different ways is portrayed as the King of the Jews.

It begins of course as he enters Jerusalem.

All of the details in the story of the Triumphal Entry point to the fact that Jesus is King. Jesus tells his disciples to go and pick up a donkey and a colt that are tethered at a certain place.

And if anyone asks why they are taking these animals the disciples are to say, ‘The Lord needs them’ and with that the animals will be released to their care.

In other words Jesus choose his mode of entry into Jerusalem deliberately. Jesus was claiming to be King of the Jews by riding the donkey into town. This was a fulfillment of prophecy. We read that prophecy in our lesson for today,

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a humble one, especially compared to the military parades of Pilate who entered the city surrounded by the formidable Roman troops.

But, the Jewish people took notice of Jesus and the way he entered Jerusalem. They knew what it meant. They knew the prophecy. This was the approach of a King.

And so the people began to throw cloaks and branches on the road to welcome their king. And they shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

This was a royal welcome for Jesus.

And the Romans noticed.

THE CRUCIFIED KING

Later in the story Pilate will ask Jesus directly, “Are you king of the Jews?” And to that Jesus will answer indirectly, “You’re the one who said it.”

Pilate couldn't make heads or tails out of Jesus. He didn't think Jesus was guilty of any crime, but in the end even a king who rides on a donkey was a threat to the Empire. Pilate was afraid that Jesus would stir up the crowd and disturb the Pax Romana, the “peace” they delivered at the point of a sword.

There could be no king but Caesar.

And so, despite the misgivings of his wife and his own sense of ambivalence, Pilate gives in to the political realities of life. He tries to wash his hands of this decision, and he tells the crowd that the blood of this innocent man will be on their hands.

And the crowd is more than happy to take responsibility for the action. They shout, “Crucify him. Let his blood be upon us and upon our children!” The blood that was shed that day would be upon the heads.

But, they were not the only ones responsible. Jesus would die for the sins of the world on this day. In a way the crucifixion was an indictment of the world. God sent his Son into the world to save the world, and what did we do? We killed him.

Pilate hands Jesus over to be flogged and then crucified.

The soldiers mock the idea that Jesus is king. They say, “Are you kidding me? What kind of king is this?” They give him crown of thorns and a reed for a scepter. And then in cruel jest they say, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

Then, Jesus is crucified, and Pilate hangs that sign above him: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

WHY DID THEY CRUCIFY JESUS?

The question in the minds of many people is why did they crucify Jesus?

They crucified Jesus because he really did act like a king. Jesus challenged the authority of the religious and political powers of his day. Jesus insisted upon justice for the poor and the downtrodden.

And that gets you into trouble, not only in Jesus’ day but in our day and time as well. Matthew’s gospel makes it plain.

We often read the 21st chapter of Matthew on Palm Sunday, and then turn directly to the Passion story in the 27th chapter of Matthew on Good Friday.

But, the answer to our question about why they crucified Jesus is found in those chapters that we often do not study in the context of Holy Week. What did Jesus do after he arrived in Jerusalem?

THE TEMPLE CLEASSED

Well the first thing Jesus did was to drive out all those who were buying and selling in the temple. Not only did Jesus attack the religious leaders now he was attacking the chamber of commerce! He said that they were turning the place of prayer into a robber’s den.

And immediately after that Jesus began to heal the blind and the lame. In response to these miracles the children began to sing the royal song again, “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

This did not amuse the religious leaders. Jesus was hurting their bottom line and challenging their authority.

And now in the temple courts the children were singing his praises. They told Jesus to shut the kids up. But, Jesus says it as a fulfillment of prophecy, “Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself.”

TESTING JESUS

Throughout the week Jesus continues to press his case. He comes back into Jerusalem and enters the temple. The religious leaders challenge Jesus’ authority, but Jesus refuses to play their game. Instead, Jesus tells several scathing parables that are obviously directed toward the religious leaders. They want to arrest Jesus on the spot, but they are afraid to do it because the people all think that Jesus is a prophet.

So, they try to trap Jesus.

First the Pharisees (along with the Herodians) come to Jesus and ask him a taxing question. “Should we pay taxes to Rome?” If he says, “Yes, all good citizens need to pay taxes” then he will lose favor with the people who have been oppressed by the taxation of Rome. On the other hand if Jesus says, “Don’t give those Romans a cent” he will give the religious authorities all the ammunition to take him before the Roman authorities.

But, once again Jesus avoids their trap. He says, “Give Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and give God the things that are God’s.”

Next the Sadducees try to trip up Jesus with a question about the resurrection, but Jesus has no trouble with the Sadducees. He says that the resurrection will be much greater and much different from what they had imagined.

And finally, the Pharisees come back with a theological question. They say, “Summarize the whole law in one commandment.” Jesus says, “I can’t

summarize it in one command, but I can with two. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

They decided not to test him any more. It was just making Jesus look good.

But, Jesus was not done with them. He began to ask the religious leaders questions that they couldn't answer. And then Jesus started to make some very damning accusations toward these religious leaders.

Among other things Jesus said that they didn't know what they were talking about. He said that they were blind leaders of the blind.

He said that they took advantage of the poor and heaped burdens upon the people they were supposed to help. He said that they reveled in public adoration, but wouldn't lift a finger to make things easier for those who were oppressed.

The 23rd chapter of Matthew is nothing but a long diatribe against the religious leaders.

He accuses them of hypocrisy and killing the prophets. He says that they “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” They are devoted to the minutia of the law but neglect the more important parts of the law.

He says that they are greedy and self-indulgent.

But, then after all those accusations and condemnations, Jesus weeps over the fall of the religious leaders from grace. The 23rd chapter ends with Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and her rejection of the prophets and God's message.

DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

But, then Jesus goes back on the attack. In the 24th chapter begins with Jesus predicting the destruction of the temple. He says, “Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

The rest of this chapter and much of the 25th chapter are filled with apocalyptic images of the end and encouragement to his disciples to be faithful even though they will face persecution in the age to come.

PASSOVER AND BETRAYAL

And then in the 26th chapter we come to Passover, the time when the lamb is sacrificed and the people of God remember their salvation from captivity. Jesus says that this year the Son of Man will be sacrificed. The Son of Man will be crucified, and a new Passover will be born.

The familiar story plays out in this chapter. Betrayal and denial are predicted. The Last Supper is eaten.

Jesus asks the disciples to help him watch and pray while he struggles with his mission in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But, the disciples fall asleep.

Judas betrays Jesus. The disciples run away. Jesus is arrested. Peter denies Jesus.

Jesus stands alone against the powers that be. And Pilate, the religious leaders, and the voice of the fickle crowd condemn Jesus to death.

JESUS DIED ALONE?

It seems that the title of our choir's anthem for today is true. Jesus died alone.

Not even God seems to be with him any more.

Jesus shouts, as he dies on the cross,
 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus asks the question on the cross that we are afraid to ask out loud. Are we alone? Is God really there? Has God forsaken us?

Is Jesus the king of kings or is it all a sad joke, a warning sign over the cross for those who would dare to challenge the powers that be?

That first parade into Jerusalem was no accident. Jesus deliberately chose to enter as a king, one who fulfilled prophecy.

But, the cross was no accident either. The cross was not another tragic death of one who was squashed by the powers that be. The cross was the triumph of grace and forgiveness and the hope that is eternal.

It looked like Jesus died alone. But, this was not the case. God was in Christ, and next week we hear the rest of that story.

WHO IS JESUS?

But today we look at a king who is crucified and a world that has gone dark.

Who is this Jesus and what does it mean? Can a king reign from the cross? Can God be present even at a crucifixion?

A preacher told of attending a Palm Sunday service in Washington, DC. He said this particular congregation had a remarkable history of social concern and activism in a very challenging urban environment.

And on Palm Sunday it was their tradition to march with palms not simply around the sanctuary, but around the neighborhood and then come back to the sanctuary for the reading of the Passion story.

At first the pastor thought it was a great idea, going around the neighborhood lauding the name of Jesus in his nation's capitol. It seemed very fitting.

But, as they made their journey he began to feel that the whole thing was a bit trivial. The church was a vibrant church, but it was not that large a church, and there were not that many worshippers at the early service.

People glanced their way as the little procession made its way down the streets of the city, and a few smiled their encouragement. But, most just seemed confused.

“No one joined our pilgrimage or shouted, ‘Hosanna,’” the preacher said.

When Jesus made it into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, he got the same reaction from those city folk. They asked, “Who is this?” They are confounded by this odd procession.

He is not like any king they could have imagined. He is hailed as the King of the Jews, the Messiah by peasants, lepers, cripples, prostitutes and day laborers.

Who is this country bumpkin from Nazareth who leads the most unlikely royal parade? No wonder the city folk are confused about Jesus.

He comes not in power but in weakness. And yet he does not back down from the challenge. He confronts the authorities. He calls for justice.

And the outcome is predictable. He is crucified. In our world we believe might makes right ... or at the very least might wins, a king riding on a donkey is laughable.

THE WORLD IS WRONG

But, the world is wrong. Might does not make right. Violence does not create peace and security. Violence leads to more violence, and might leads to corruption and evil.

Jesus could not conquer evil by adopting the tools of evil.

Pilate and the religious leaders really didn't need to worry about King Jesus. He didn't come to take over their world. He came to replace it. He came to break the cycle of violence and repression.

And the only way this King could rule was to die on behalf of those who tormented him.

Martin Luther King once put it this way, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Jesus did not die to make God love us. Jesus died as an expression of God's love, a love demonstrated in sacrifice and forgiveness.

Two thousand years after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, another visitor came to the city, Germany's last Kaiser, Wilhelm II. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through.

After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate. The sign read,

"A better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."

What made Jesus a better man? What was it about him that led the people to spread their cloaks and wave their branches in the air? What is it about him that still inspires millions of people to give their lives to him and even for him?

Paul put it this way in his Letter to the Philippians:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Don't misunderstand. We can't be like Jesus. There was only one King of kings. But, we can let Jesus influence how we think about things.

The message of the cross challenges the assumptions of the world. The world still thinks might makes right and that peace comes through carrying the biggest stick.

But, it is the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice and service that leads to glory, God's glory.

Once again we enter the city singing His song, much to the bemusement of those around us. But, we dare to follow because we know the truth.

Easter is coming, and soon everything will change. Everything will change forever.

Amen.