



“Engaging in Praising the King”

Zechariah 9:9; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-21; Mark 11:1-11

Hosanna! We praise our king and welcome him into our city and our lives. But are we ready to embrace the surprises he brings?

The crowds are gathered outside the city walls of Jerusalem, at the eastern gate. They are ready and they are pumped! The day has come. At long last, when it seemed that God would never hear their cries, God has sent his Messiah, his anointed one. This king, from the house of David, would inaugurate a true God-intended kingdom and set about to put the world right. At long last, the Jews would be free of their hated Roman oppressors. At long last, the temple would be cleansed of all the money-grubbing, ambitious pagan influences. At long last God’s king was arriving, ready to be welcomed into the city as a king should be welcomed. Hosanna,¹ indeed!

As for Jesus, he purposely wraps all these messianic symbols around himself: the colt, the ride through the city gates, the palm branches, the cloaks laid out in front of him, the shouted Hosannas. All of it. And for the first time, Jesus refers to himself as “Lord” (Mark 11:3). The waiting is over; the time has come.

Have you ever waited so long for something that you could hardly stand it, that you thought you’d burst. Or worse, you gave up hope that the time would come at all. I can remember waiting for Christmas as a young boy. Each day after Thanksgiving seemed to last a week. By Dec 22 or so, my anticipation was so worked up that it was all I could to hang on. And, of course, as any wise person would tell you, no matter how wonderful Christmas was, it could never match up to my expectation.

I guess it was a bit like that for the Jews in Jesus day. They had waited so very long for the arrival of their Savior, their Redeemer, their Messiah. Indeed, there had been a few would-be Messiahs in the decades before Jesus and there would be some more after his death and resurrection. Now, it was this carpenter from the small village of Nazareth who was putting himself forward as Messiah.

Longing for a King . . . and a liberator

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, including their king, who was blinded by the Babylonians after being forced to watch the execution of his sons.

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, they had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come. 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, at which time 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. And all these messianic pretenders were eventually executed by the Romans.

In 27AD or so, one Jew named Jesus, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, 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 those 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, Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God’s people.

¹ “Hosanna” means “Save us!”

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 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 (Zechariah 9:9). 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 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 branches, 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 that cross only days later, turning a symbol of shame into the place of God's victory over sin and death.

The Welcome

But on Sunday, Jesus was welcomed by the crowds. Hopes, dreams, expectations . . . all focused on Jesus as he rode that small colt in through the city gates. And yet, five days later, Jesus was hung on a Roman cross to die after being ridiculed by Jerusalem crowds. Granted, we can't know how many from the crowds on Sunday were present in the crowds on Friday. But the question remains, why was the city not swept up in messianic fervor as the week proceeded?

Why? Because Jesus, God's Messiah, was not what they expected. They wanted a king who would lead them to victory against their pagan oppressors. Instead, Jesus would bring them God's victory as he hung on that cross.

Perhaps Palm Sunday is a good time for us all to think about our own expectations of Jesus. What do we do when we meet the true Jesus. It is easy to shape Jesus into a savior who meets our perceived needs and expectations, who is a Rorschach blot waiting to be brought to life. Certainly, scholars on Jesus have this problem. In their research, they often find the "historical" Jesus that they are looking for. Why should we think that we are exempt from the same problem?

God inspired the writings of the New Testament so that, in them, we can meet and welcome into our lives the genuine article, the Jesus-who-is. And like those first palm wavers, we better prepare ourselves to be surprised by this king we praise.

What is distinctive about Mark's Palm Sunday account?

In his Interpretation series commentary on Mark's gospel, Lamar Williamson helps us to see Mark's distinctive portrait of Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem. (I've abridged and edited his comments somewhat for better readability.)

"The significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is differently understood in each of the four Gospels. In John's, the procession is altogether triumphant, complete with palm branches and the acknowledgement of Jesus' opponents that 'the world has gone after him.' Matthew, like John, quotes the messianic text in Zech. 9:9 but lays greater stress on the paradoxical nature of Jesus' kingship: "Your king is coming to you, humble ..." (Matt. 21:5). In Luke, though the crowds hail Jesus as King and the Pharisees call him "Teacher," the evangelist depicts Jesus as the prophet who foretells the destruction of the city and weeps over it (Luke 19:41-44). In Mark, this latter trait is deferred to chapter 13. Jesus is not shown as the king who, though glorious, is nonetheless lowly. Rather, Jesus enters as the lowly one, hero only to a motley rabble, but he is ironically more of a king than they think.

With attention fixed on Jesus, the reader is pointed to the authoritative lowliness of God displayed in Jesus Christ. That lowliness is, of course, seen elsewhere in Jesus' life and ministry; but here its quiet dignity and hidden majesty come to the fore. Lowliness is a quality all too seldom associated with God, even by those who hold that God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

To be clear about the grandeur of the divine lowliness is important because we tend to become like the God or gods we worship. It is easy enough to join the crowds that sing "Hosanna" fore and aft of Jesus. Jesus makes no objection to these demonstrations, but his silence in their midst is striking. For those who look and listen intently, his silent presence may become compelling. Some will follow in his way, acknowledging that they know him but in part. They will know failure, as did that first, fickle crowd. But by the grace of a crucified and risen Lord, those who continue to follow him may come also to share, in some measure, his lowliness and his strength."