

“The Promised King”

Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:1–11; John 12:12–19

Who, exactly, enters Jerusalem on that Sunday two millennia ago?

Hmmm . . . last week’s sermon was titled, “The Promised Messiah,” and this week’s is titled, “The Promised King.” Seems redundant, for “Messiah” is a royal title; it means “anointed one” and the kings of Israel were anointed.

The titles would be two ways to say the same thing if

Jesus were only the Messiah, but he was and is more . . . much more. To grasp this, we need to pull the gospel of John into this series on Matthew. But first, some needed background.



Longing for a king

When the Israelites settled in the promised land, 1,200 years before Jesus, they did not have a king like all of their neighbors. God was their king; men and women called judges settled disputes and led the people into battle with their oppressors. But things deteriorated until everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, not God’s eyes.

And so the Israelites began to demand a king, a human king, like everyone else. And, God granted their request, raising up Saul to be their first king. And after Saul, 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 imprisoned. Indeed, to many Israelites it 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 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 Jewish 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, a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited mashia, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, 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 Matthew 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 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,¹ symbols of abundance and thanks. But there was more going on . . . much more.

Exactly, who is Jesus?

This is always the question. It was the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. And it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The Palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed one. Like Matthew, in John's brief telling the crowds shout Hosanna. They sing out "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel," from Psalm 118. But the crowds wrongly expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King, that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has come to a head.

John helps us to see that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John's quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9, as in Matthew. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – very messianic in other words. **But John changed the words...**and herein lies the key to the deeper meaning of Palm Sunday.

John changes the opening words of the quotation from "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion" to "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion." Here, John draws on Zephaniah 3.² The fuller quote from Zephaniah 3:14-16 (I've bolded the key phrase) will make clearer what John is accomplishing with the change:

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. Pause for a moment and reflect on this. Jews on the streets whispered, "No king but God!" in defiance of Rome and in remembering that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob should have always been embraced as their king. And, now in Jesus, it was happening, YHWH was returning to Zion!

Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple,

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.

² I am continually struck by how carefully constructed are the Gospels and the other New Testament writings. John, like the other writers, skillfully pulls together scriptural quotations and allusions to make his points. We might wonder whether any of his readers could comprehend John's careful use of the Old Testament, but that is only because our own knowledge of Scripture is so inadequate. We miss things that would be plainly evident to John's first readers.

there wasn't really any sign that God had returned.³ The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God's promise: "See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on Monday, Jesus didn't head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and their temple. A couple of decades later, long before the writing of any of the Gospels, Paul would describe the body of Christ as God's temple, as well as each individual believer (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20).

Whom do we welcome?

In his brief telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, John wants us to see that the crowds rightly welcome Jesus as a king, as God's anointed. But he also wants us to see that the crowds do not understand how God's work to redeem them will move forward, that God himself had arrived in their midst, that God would reveal his glory and mercy on a Roman cross. There was zero expectation of a suffering Messiah, much less a God who suffers. They think they know what their problem is and how to fix it (a warrior King) – but only because they were listening to the world, not to God.

When we welcome Jesus into our congregation, into our lives, what do we expect? We Americans are a pragmatic lot. We want to know how to fix what is wrong. Our theology too often devolves into "if it works, it must be true." But is this all there is to the Good News? Granted we have problems, but the biblical view is that we often can't name the problems or diagnose them properly, much less put things right. Sin causes us to look at our lives through the lens of this world, rather than the lenses of cross and resurrection. How can we help each other to hear our Lord's call, to exchange our priorities and ambitions for those given us by God?

³ Here is the general idea. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land they were certainly still in jail with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven – and the coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God's Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel... That is a lot packed into a few sentences, but this *is* a footnote after all!