

“Return of the King”

Zechariah 9:9; Mark 11:1–11 (NRSV)

*The King rides into Jerusalem.
Hosanna!*



One of the most important characters in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* 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 branches,¹ 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 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?

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.