



King As Come

Psalm 118; Matthew 21:1-11

Just in case anybody has missed it, we are in the midst of an election year. Everyone seems to be lining up in support of their particular candidate. Many feel disenfranchised from the system as their nominees have not made the cut in primaries of one or another party. Many competing interests are at stake: the Iraq war, the economy, business interests, tax rates, government spending, health care, aid for those in poverty, education, environmental concerns, energy policy, peace, justice, and “The American Way.” Amid concerns over “who will be the greatest in the realm,” is the issue of who will profit. What will we get out of it? We all have our own pet issues to put forward, seeking to advance our own causes over those of another. Is there any way to really know what causes our candidates will truly advance, however? Once elected, we have little voice left in the process.

A similar conversation was going on among the disciples leading up to Jesus’ triumphal entry. Jesus had talked about his impending death, but no one wanted to hear that, so they discarded it. No one else had Jesus’ death on their platform agenda. They were ready to acclaim Jesus as Messiah, David’s royal son, the anointed of God, and prophet to usher in God’s ultimate reign. They were also, if not more concerned with what they would get out of it. Two of them had asked for specific bequests for power in the coming reign. Jesus answered by healing two blind men who recognized their need to see above any desire to wield power.

The disciples were privy to Jesus’ teaching on power, authority, and service. They were privy to Jesus’ words about the kind of king he had come to be. That does not mean they had accepted his words at face value. They were struggling to see that Jesus really meant the message of love, forgiveness, and mercy that he proclaimed. Perhaps they had been surprised too many times in too short a span to have had a chance to process all that Jesus had said and done. Perhaps they were struggling with their social baggage of expectations on Messiah, and just had not managed to see that Jesus wanted them to throw all their presuppositions out the window.

For three years, he had come teaching, healing, and ministering to the needs of others with little thought to his own comfort. He had been asked to play the power games of the social structure, but had refused. He had been asked to allow himself to be used as a means for others to achieve their dreams, but he had held firm to his own sense of mission, purpose, and call. He defined greatness as service to others. He spoke of purpose in giving his life, not advancing self. He came as God’s anointed, but not as the disciples had anticipated. They had heard all the campaign speech and strategy. When it came down to the wire, however, they were expecting something different from what Jesus had been and done in their midst.

It is hard to set aside our preconceived ideas. We make assumptions about life as a matter of course. We pre-judge issues and people based on previous discussions and experience. While it is not acceptable to be prejudiced in today’s world, yet we are all prejudiced. It is how we organize our world and respond appropriately to people, places, events and things. Prejudice becomes a problem when we allow our prejudices to devalue others and act in discrimination. It is a problem when we are unwilling to keep our preconceived ideas open to change. It is helpful to be prejudiced that cars are not an immediate threat to people on a sidewalk. When a car moves toward the sidewalk, however, we need to reassess the level of threat it poses—quickly!

The disciples struggled with their expectations and the reality of the Jesus they were learning to know. They had their expectations, dreams, ambitions, and desires to deal with. They were prejudiced by their upbringing to expect Messiah to bring about a new political reality in their midst. They assumed it would look similar to the governing patterns they already knew. Prejudice gave them a model of how a king behaved. They anticipated their roles in the hierarchy of power they were about to enjoy. They failed to grasp that Jesus had not come in a manner that meshed with their prejudice and expectation.

Jesus came into Jerusalem with some visible symbols of the manner of his reign. In fulfillment of Zechariah's words, he entered in peace. He did not come on a charger, but on a donkey with its colt. The manner of his entrance looked back on the character of his ministry in word and deed. If it was hard for the disciples to accept the stated character of Jesus' reign, how would the crowds respond?

We know the crowds had their own mix of agendas for Messiah. Foremost was the overthrow of Rome. Yet Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey with its colt, a symbol of peace, not conflict. Would they allow Jesus to be Messiah and King on those terms?

We often look at the crowds welcoming Jesus on Palm Sunday as fickle. We assume it was the same crowd who acclaimed him at the gate of the city and shouted for his crucifixion. With around a million people in Jerusalem for those events, it is unlikely so. We assume the crowd around him was all in accord in hailing him as the expected Son of David, yet the city was in turmoil. People were trying to figure out who this was the crowds were acclaiming with shouts of "Hosanna!" The stated answer might take us by surprise.

They did not claim him to be the king. They did not call him Messiah. They said, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The Hebrew understanding of prophet was that of God's mouthpiece. This is the term they used to characterize the one they hailed as coming in the name of *Yahweh*. Matthew uses the term king in quoting Zechariah, but not so the crowds. Perhaps, like the blind men on the way, they understood what the disciples were still struggling to grasp. This is Jesus. This is the same prophet, God's mouthpiece, through whom God has been speaking from Nazareth and throughout Galilee. As Jesus has been going around ministering grace, mercy, and love in God's name, so has he now entered Jerusalem. If he is king, he has come as he has been living and ministering, not in accord with our understanding of political leadership.

His power is love. His platform is peace. The character of his mission lies in his purpose to die and give his life as a ransom for many. He is come on behalf of all the people, not to fulfill the issues or desires of any one party. He is not come to do any different from the manner in which he had already taught and ministered grace upon the lives of so many. He is come that all might live under a new plan of redemption, grace, mercy, unity, and love.

He did not enter Jerusalem to further my platform. He did not enter Jerusalem to elevate some at the expense of others. He did not come to divide, but to fashion us into one body—the body of his continued presence and ministry. Jesus is King according to the character of his coming. Are we ready to lay aside our pet issues and expectations, to allow Jesus to be who he truly is? Anything else is violence to the manner in which He is come.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*