

The Humble King

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[0 : 00] Good morning. I'd like to add my welcome to Jonathan's. Today is Palm Sunday, which marks the beginning of the Easter story, the week in which Jesus came to Jerusalem, was crucified and rose from the dead.

And today we're going to read and we're going to think about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. And I hope that it'll be helpful for us all to reflect on. I pray that it'll help us to focus more on Jesus in the midst of this lockdown and all the feelings of fear and fatigue that we might be suffering from. So let me read from Matthew chapter 21. We'll be looking at verses 1 to 17. As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples saying to them, go to the village ahead of you.

And at once you will find a donkey tied there with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. And if anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them and he will send them right away. This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet. Say to daughter Zion, see your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

[1 : 25] The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, who is this? The crowds answered, this is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

It is written, he said to them, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers. The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them.

[2 : 35] But when the chief priests and teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant.

Do you hear what these children are saying? They asked him. Yes, replied Jesus. Have you never read from the lips of children and infants?

You, Lord, have called forth your praise. And he left them and went out to the city of Bethany where he spent the night. Let me pray before I begin to explain this passage.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for these great words. Lord, we thank you for all that they speak to us of Jesus.

Father, I pray that you would encourage us and teach us from them this morning. I pray you'd help us grow as we learn more about Christ, his identity and what he came to do.

[3 : 33] Father, build us up, we pray, and help us to see Christ more clearly this morning through your holy and perfect word. Amen. So as we begin, I want to make an observation about symbols, particularly symbols of royalty.

Let's say once we're out of lockdown, feeling starved of culture, you fancy taking a trip to a portrait gallery. You wander around the walls of painted faces.

As you glance at the walls from one painting to the next, there's a variety of different people to see in these portraits. But there's one type of portrait that's particularly obvious.

The royal portrait. How can you tell? Well, there's a few dead giveaways, isn't there? There's the crown for a start and the long red robes. Perhaps there's a scepter in one hand and an oar in the other.

Or maybe a throne or a majestic stallion to carry them. Kings and queens are easily identifiable because of their symbols.

[4 : 41] When Jesus was alive, the Jews had a different set of symbols. And most of these came from their Bible, the Old Testament. Matthew, the writer of this story, uses these Old Testament symbols to show us something about Jesus.

What we discover in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is that Jesus' entry is pregnant with symbolic weight. Using Old Testament symbols, Matthew paints a portrait of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and into the temple.

And the portrait reveals his kingship and it reveals his lordship. And the question we find this story asking us is, how will we respond to Jesus, the lord and king?

So we're going to look at this under three headings. The first is the king who comes to his city. The second, the lord who comes to his temple. And then lastly, as we think about our response, we're going to look at the children who come to Jesus.

So, looking at our first point, the king who comes to his city. Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus is the king.

[6 : 04] And as we said, he does this by using Old Testament symbols. The Jews of his day would have understood. So we're going to be doing quite a bit of flicking back to the Old Testament.

But if you bear with it, I hope that you'll be excited by the picture that's painted of Jesus. Jerusalem, it was the capital city of the Jews. And it was the center of their identity, really.

Not least because the temple was there, but also because it was where the king should be as well. And as Jesus and his disciples come close to the city, Jesus makes a rather unorthodox request. Matthew writes in the first few verses, Jesus wants a donkey.

Why now that he's reached his destination and he'd been getting on fine without a ride before. So why does he need a donkey at this point? And why in particular a donkey?

[7 : 24] Why is Jesus so specific? Well, the reason is symbolism. For us, the significance of a donkey is somewhat clouded. Luckily for us, Matthew's on hand to explain.

Matthew tells us in verses four and five that this took place to fulfill what was spoken of by the prophet. Say to daughter Zion, see your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

So here's our first bit of Old Testament symbolism. God spoke of many things through the prophets in the Old Testament. Many of them spoke of a future time when God's king would come and restore Israel to its former glory and beyond.

And these words of prophecy that Matthew quotes reveal that the king will come to Jerusalem on a donkey. So when Jesus, three years after his ministry began and after he's developed quite a considerable following due to his teaching and his miraculous power, arrives in Jerusalem on a donkey.

The symbolism is not lost on those around him. We rewatched Shrek recently. If you know the film, you'll know that the character donkey relishes being called a noble steed.

[8 : 45] And this donkey in Matthew, it really is a noble steed because it is the sign that the king has come to his city. But it also hints that God's king is not quite the sort of king that people would have been expecting.

But God's king comes riding in on a donkey, reveals that he's a humble king, not a king coming to wage war on the Roman oppressors, but humble. Our translation says your king comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey.

But that could equally be humble and riding on a donkey. Jesus is the humble king, the humble king who displayed his ultimate humility when he went to the cross.

And his entrance is the first step to that humble death. He's also the saving king. And it's salvation and deliverance that the crowd expect.

Those prophetic words that Matthew quotes, there are two prophetic words that Matthew's brought together. The first part comes from Isaiah and the second from Zechariah. And the interesting thing to note is that in their original context, both prophets are speaking of God's salvation coming to his people through his king.

[10 : 09] They expect restoration and deliverance. That expectation comes through clearly in the people's cries as Jesus arrives. Let me read what they say.

These are shouts for a savior.

That word Hosanna means save or deliver us. And son of David, well, that was shorthand for the king. So when people shout Hosanna to the son of David, they call to their king to deliver them. These phrases come from Psalm 118, a great Old Testament song celebrating the steadfast love and salvation of God.

When the people see Jesus riding into Jerusalem, they see the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Bringing restoration and salvation to God's people.

[11 : 19] Hosanna in the highest. It's a cry of expectation. A cry of trust that God will save through his king. So he's a humble king and he's a saving king.

He's also an adored king. People are always interested in the royal family. I must confess, not myself much. But I mean, the buzz about Harry and Meghan earlier this year is probably the most recent example.

The height of royal adoration was probably the British public's devotion to an obsession over Princess Diana. But even that pales next to the adoration that Jesus receives here.

There must have been a massive buzz about Jesus leading up to this event. From Matthew chapter 4, we've been told that Jesus' fame spread from Galilee down to Jerusalem and beyond.

Even Herod, the puppet king of the Romans, had heard of him. So when Matthew writes, the whole city was stirred and asked, who is this? The answer of the crowds would make sense to those in Jerusalem.

[12 : 24] This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. Jesus, the man who's been on everyone's lips, has come. And he's coming in the way that the Jews expected God's king to come.

So the crowd think that now the Messiah has arrived. And God's promised king is going to restore Israel. A new golden age was probably their hope.

They probably envisaged a bloody defeat of the Roman overlords. Jesus, and Jesus ascending the throne of his ancestor, David, in Jerusalem. Listen to how they behave.

Matthew tells us, they brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

Their words and their actions speak of worship and praise. The king has come. Everything is going to change. The surprise is that the change didn't come in quite the way that they expected.

[13 : 35] Jesus is the king. And Matthew tells us these details so that we, along with the crowd, recognize him as king. But Jesus is not the sort of king the world might expect.

No crowns, no robes, no scepters, no orbs. He's a humble king who came to die. And the salvation that he brought was not deliverance from Rome.

No, instead it was so much better. As the story goes on, we'll see that for Jesus to be the saving king, he had to die to save us from our slavery to sin.

Rome, that was a local problem. The deliverance that King Jesus brings is wider and is from sin and from death. I suspect if coronavirus has taught us anything, it's that we are part of a global community.

The Bible's been teaching that for generations. We're all, as humanity, united in our need for deliverance from sin and from death.

[14 : 46] And that's what Jesus' entry on a donkey was proclaiming. Once in Jerusalem, where is it that Jesus heads first?

To the temple. The temple was the centre of Jewish religion and culture. And it was there that people could come to God. And it was the heart of God's people's worship.

It was God's temple. It's God's temple. Therefore, it was Jesus' temple. Because Jesus isn't just the king coming to his city.

He's also the Lord coming to his temple. And that's our second point. What Jesus sees when he enters, it doesn't make him happy.

So the first thing that Matthew shows us when Jesus enters the temple is a sinful temple judged. Matthew tells us, Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there.

[15 : 49] He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. It is written, he said to them, my house will be called a house of prayer.

But you are making it a den of robbers. It seems on face value like a strange and reactionary thing for Jesus to do. But it's because it's his temple.

The building designed for worship of God and offering of sacrifices has been polluted with greed and with selfishness. Money's replaced God and selfishness has replaced love and worship. And so Jesus, the God who should be being worshipped in his temple, he judges it by overturning the tables of the money changers and driving out everyone profiteering from sacrifices.

We get two more quotes from Old Testament prophets as Jesus judges the temple. He tells them, quoting from Isaiah, that my house will be called a house of prayer.

[16:53] Isaiah had envisaged a temple free from corruption where God's house was a place for all the world to come and worship God.

And this temple isn't doing that. Instead, it looks like the temple looked way back in Jeremiah's day. Prophet Jeremiah is the one who said that the temple had become a den of robbers.

And he said that hundreds of years before this moment. So the religious establishment of Jesus' day would have been horrified to hear the temple coated with the same accusations of corruption. Jesus is suggesting that nothing had changed. And indeed, nothing had. We just had to have our washing machine replaced.

And we noticed for a while that it hadn't been doing its job quite as well as it could have. The weird smell of the clothes that were coming out of it was a dead giveaway. When it decided late at night that it wanted to go on fire and the smell of burning started going through the kitchen, well, at that point we knew that it definitely needed to go.

[18:08] Similarly, the temple Jesus comes to was failing and not doing its job. It was diseased and riddled with self-interest. So did Israel ever see the temple become a place of worship for all people?

The answer is yes. Whilst this sinful temple was judged, Jesus' actions revealed a better temple promised. As we needed a new washing machine that would do its job properly and not go on fire. So Jesus promises a temple that does what it was supposed to do. Hear what Matthew says in verses 14 and 15. The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them.

But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant.

So setting aside the indignant attitude of the priests for a moment, what we see after Jesus clears out the temple is a vision of something better and brighter.

[19:16] The religious leaders had barred off most of the temple, but Jesus, God himself who comes to his temple, shows that all are able to come to God.

The outcasts in society come to him, the blind, the lame and the children. He doesn't rebuff them. He doesn't reject them. He heals the sick and he hears the children.

The prophets had spoken about renewal and Jesus' actions reveal that he brings that renewal. In Christ is the compassion and the healing that the world needs and should be found in his temple. And it's a picture of the future that Jesus came to usher in. A future free from disease, sin and death.

Jesus is the restoration of Israel and the restoration of the temple through his actions, which display that he is God come to his temple. It's like the first blossoms that appear as winter comes to a close.

[20:27] It's a visual clue in nature that spring has come. Similarly, Jesus is giving us lots of visual clues grounded in Old Testament promises.

And Matthew's drawing our attention to them so that we recognize that Jesus is fulfilling God's plan of salvation and restoration.

Winter is over. Spring has arrived. But the spring and restoration that Jesus brought was surprising to his Jewish contemporaries.

Jesus did restore and he did rejuvenate the temple, but not quite in the way that they expected. Before Jesus died on the cross, the only way to come to God was through sacrifices made in the temple.

But when Jesus died as the perfect sacrifice, there was no need for the old temple. To come to God, people no longer needed to go to a physical temple.

[21:27] They needed to come to Jesus. And this ties our two threads together. Jesus in his death became the way in which God saved people from sin and death.

And he became the way in which people can now come to God. The people, they cried Hosanna. And they looked to Jesus to restore the temple.

And that's exactly what he came to do. And it's what he did. It's what Matthew wants us to recognize. That Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Israel and to the world. And this leads us now to our final point. We've seen that Jesus is the king who comes to his city. And we've seen that he's the Lord who comes to his temple. And now because he is both Lord and king, because of that, the children are able to come to Jesus.

We've said that the way to God is now through Jesus. And the children shouting in the temple courts reveal this clearly. They sing Hosanna to the son of David.

[22 : 36] The grown-ups in the street, that's what they've been singing to Jesus. You can imagine that these kids, they're copying what they've heard and caught up in the excitement of it all. They follow Jesus and they keep singing it to him.

And its effect is a lot more controversial than they realize. Because the religious leaders, when they hear it, were not best pleased. Listen again to what Matthew says.

But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did, the children shouting in the courts, Hosanna to the son of David, they were indignant.

Do you hear what these children are saying? They asked him. Yes, replied Jesus. Have you never read? From the lips of children and infants, you, Lord, have called forth your praise.

And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night. So they see the wonderful things he did, the key word being wonderful. But they're not filled with wonder or praise.

[23 : 41] They're filled with hatred. And this is the most common response to Christ. If Christ is king, then we are not. If Christ is the way to God, then all other ways are not.

Christ's entry into Jerusalem and the temple proclaims these absolutes. And so the religious leaders don't accept him as king.

And they refuse to come to God through him. The danger that all of us must be on guard against is their resistance to Jesus seeping into our own hearts.

The crowds who in this chapter lie in the streets of Jerusalem singing Hosanna to the son of David. Well, within a week, they will be the same. The same crowds will be calling for Christ's blood.

The response of the religious leaders is compelling. It's the response that the crowds follow when they realize that Jesus is not the sort of king that they wanted. To recognize Jesus as our king means being his subject and following what he says.

[24 : 51] It's to recognize Jesus as the only way to God. And the only salvation from sin and death is to admit that we need salvation and to admit that we need to be right with God.

These are things that we naturally don't want to do. Maybe you're listening and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. These are genuinely hard things to accept.

The reason that Jesus Christ is so wonderful and the reason that he's worth following is because he is these things. He is the saving king and he is the way to God the Father.

One of my faults is I'm not very good at asking for help. Other people might find it hard to respect those in authority. And all of us, to some degree, struggle with giving up our desires.

Many of our natural inclinations lead us away from Christ. And so the example to follow is the children. Jesus quotes from Psalm 8 in response to the complaints of the religious leaders.

[26 : 05] From the lips of children and infants, you, Lord, have called forth your praise. It's a great response to the leaders. Jesus is telling them that the children are right to sing and call him the son of David.

He's also revealing to the priests that he is God. When the children sing Jesus praises, they sing the praises of God himself.

The priests and teachers, they're not won over. But the children are defended because they are in the right. Jesus is king. And they recognize that.

The response that Jesus deserves is praise. Jesus is the way to the father. The response he deserves is recognition and reverence. I don't know where you are with Jesus today.

Perhaps you've never recognized him as king. Or perhaps you have your whole life. Or perhaps you have, but at the moment, you just have your doubts.

[27 : 10] On this Palm Sunday, I'd encourage you to recognize Jesus for the king he is. At a time like this, it's a comfort to know that he is the saving king.

It's a comfort to know that death has been defeated by him. And it's a comfort to know that he's preparing a place for all his people.

To go and be with him when death comes for us or when he returns. It's a comfort and a blessing to know that Jesus is the way to God. So even though we live in strange times, an uncertainty crouches at every corner.

The one who recognizes Jesus as Lord is known by the creator of everything, who holds all things in the palm of his hand. And so as we close, I simply want to encourage us to recognize Jesus as the king of creation and Lord of all.

I want to encourage us to be like children who, in the midst of a crisis, turn to the only one who can give us peace. The crowds didn't stick the course.

[28 : 30] They abandoned Jesus when the time came. But if we follow with childlike faith to the foot of the cross where the crowds had failed to follow, we will find salvation and comfort in the arms of the king.

Because in the arms of Jesus is the promise of spring, new life and life eternal through him, our saving king.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that Jesus really is our king. We thank you that he came to give us deliverance and salvation from sin, death and the devil.

We thank you that he is the one through whom we can come to you. We thank you that he is able to make us right before you through his death.

And that in him you see us as your children. Father, I pray that this Palm Sunday you would help us to respond rightly to Jesus wherever we are, wherever we are with you and wherever we are in our thoughts of what it means to follow you.

[29 : 45] I pray that by your spirit you would encourage us and teach us the necessity to respond to Jesus as king and find and hold on to the hope that that brings us.

We ask these things in the name of our saviour and deliverer, your son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.