

Palm Sunday 2020

What makes Jesus a king?

Today he comes parading in like a king. Well, sorta. A humble king. Maybe the opposite of regal or triumphant as we'd normally see it. Not in a limo or private jet but on a moped. So he's not acting much like a king.

Sometimes we highlight that it's street theatre, a protest. Jesus was putting on a political rally. He's mocking, countervailing the imperial powers. He's not on a warhorse. He's not Pontius Pilate. Of course, Pilate wasn't a king, either. He was a governor. But this was probably provocative against the Roman Empire.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus has talked about a different kind of kingdom, a kingdom of heaven, a godly empire and bringing us to live under or within that alternative jurisdiction.

But Jesus doesn't claim for himself the title of king, he doesn't say he's an emperor (even if it were a very different kind of emperor). In John's Gospel at one point he runs away because the people were going to come force him to be king. When he's directly asked by Pilate if he's a king, he brushes off the question.

So this may be the one time he's treated like a king, in this Palm Sunday procession, the triumphal entry to Jerusalem.

And yet even this small solitary occasion is strange. In a normal year, Palm Sunday can feel like a bigger party than Easter, because we don't have to be dressed up as fancypants and last year we got to tromp around with a donkey. It makes it more fun and games, with a parade and lots of kid activity.

And yet, it's a weird party because the mood of Holy Week changes so rapidly. There's a standard phrase that the crowds who shouted Hosanna on Sunday were the ones who cried out Crucify on Friday. In many churches, the change comes even more rapidly; this day isn't just celebrated as Palm Sunday but also observed as Passion Sunday, so within one worship service,

from festive cheers it races ahead to hear the whole crucifixion story.

If today is Jesus' big day, it sure doesn't last very long. So much for shouting "Long Live the King."

And of course, there's this year.



No parade. No donkey. No eco-palms. No banners. No shared worship service. No combined choir. Maybe it's happening in your particular household, but in this room there are no "lips of children" to make "sweet hosannas ring." A couple weeks ago, I dreamed of gathering for worship in the parking lot, and then doing a procession with lots of honking as you waved palm branches out your car window. But even that version of frolicking is beyond what we can safely do right now.

So not only is our possibility for worship subdued; much of life is stifled and on hold. I know each of us faces that uniquely, with your own difficulties, your particular worries. I want to thank you for what you've shared of that with me—on economic concern and family challenges

and stresses and ways you're making it through the day.

Thank you for the support of being caring community. We're all confronting the same thing and this brings us together in a shared reality like nothing in our memories. But of course we're not the same. We each meet it as our individual self, with our own personalities and capacities, our own way ahead to address it. And there's a lot that's just plain physically apart, no matter how much we Zoom or call or wave across the street.

For all of the loss and diminishment, along with my prayers of grief and lament, I also hope you are finding good things, the daily bread of sustenance through this. I hope you got to see some flowers this week and buds on trees and hear the goofy robin songs. (Maybe they provide sweet hosannas ringing for now.) I hope you're getting rest and finding things to laugh and smile at. I hope you're getting enough news to feel engaged, but that you can also pull away and not need to look at everything. I hope you've had moments where life has slowed down. I hope there are things that can still feel normal. And I hope you've been able to rely on good news from God through this.

Again, that's why we turn here for this service, for good news, so you can be re-minded of the God made known in Jesus, who is celebrated in Palm Sunday's typical unusual way and the current unusual way of this Palm Sunday.

That returns us to the question of what makes Jesus a king.

You may think of a king being praised and worshipped. But that's an odd fit for Jesus since this praise is so short-lived. We don't really worship him because of power and glory; in fact, his kingdom reverses our expectations of that. Instead what we find in Jesus is love in the service of life. The exact opposite of a king who rules over, this king came to serve, even to be a slave to you.

As you live in the kingdom of heaven, as you emulate Jesus, you also serve in love. Today it's phrased as having "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" in that amazing reading from

Philippians. On Maundy Thursday, that is reinforced as a new commandment, to love one another as Jesus loved you, to lay down your life in love for others. I commend you in this work regularly, for your efforts in family, for your compassion and concern that serves our world, for all the ways and places that you offer loving service.

We know that more directly in these days, as we are all invited and instructed to lay down our lives for the sake of others, as we stay in in order to spare other lives, as we give up much of what we would know as normal life in order to slow the virus's spread, as we are suffering in our efforts to help each other. We know that's especially true for our front line care providers. It's true in uncommon praise of delivery drivers. It's true of your enormously hard working church staff dedicated to helping you. It's most broadly true of staying home. Thank you for your hard work and loving efforts for good and for life. It isn't regular glory; this is love. And we celebrate it because we are mindful of a king who served us in love.

With Jesus there's also something more than just our loving. I see it in the crowds on the Mount of Olives, and I see it in the phrase from our 2nd reading, of every tongue "in heaven and on earth and under the earth."

That very large crowd gathered on the Mount of Olives because they expected something from Jesus, they needed something from him. If it were a lesson in love, then they wouldn't have had to follow from their villages. They could've just stayed home and helped each other. But Jesus wasn't community organizing or helping neighborhoods lend a hand or setting up social services to aid the vulnerable.

The crowds followed Jesus and were shouting Hosanna because they needed God to save them, because life wasn't what it should be, because death lurked with its various overwhelming stifling intimidations.

On this Palm Sunday, we may be closer to that than usual. If we generally like the pageantry and fun, to delight in our children, to enjoy peppy music, then probably this year and in this

instance, we know more of the honest desperation. We know the cries of Hosanna. We long to be saved from death, from life that isn't what it should be. We need something from Jesus.

Maybe it's an irony in the story and occasionally in our lives that Jesus is fulfilling his role even amid the reversals where he is acclaimed as king and then forsaken, abandoned, turned against. The crowds had turned to him, but maybe they wanted a regular kind of king and emperor. Maybe they wanted more bread. Or maybe circuses. Or maybe security.

Jesus didn't drive out the Romans or fix bad government. He didn't keep curing people of their diseases. He didn't make everyone happy. But he continued to serve in love, most importantly on Friday. He laid down his life. He died because that's how he could finally and fully give himself to you, his death in service of your life.

And God raised him, highly exalted him, so that every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, meaning all creation, living and dead, all together, to be mindful of this king of love. The living and also those who have died, because this one in his love gives you life. It's an irony because when he seemed least praised and like a king, he was serving in the deepest way, exactly what he wants to give us, what we really need. We may be confident and see that in death, our God works life.

On this Palm Sunday, we know this need. On this Palm Sunday, we cry Hosanna. On this Palm Sunday, as we cry Hosanna we are the ones who will still sing Alleluia for Easter. On this Palm Sunday, we don't just look to Friday's crucifixion, but to Easter's resurrection promise, where life is victorious. On this Palm Sunday, this is why we look to Jesus.

This king says "Long Live You."

Hymn: "Jesus Shall Reign" (NCH 300)