

What If the Story Really Is About God Becoming King?

Luke 19:28-48

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Except for children, most Christians are ambivalent about Palm Sunday. We're not sure it makes sense to have a parade for Jesus a few days before he dies. In America, we're not too keen on the idea of kings, and we figure the important thing about Holy Week is that Jesus died and was raised. In fact, many churches are so unsure how they feel about Palm Sunday that they have changed it to Passion Sunday—acknowledging that most of the people present on Sunday won't make it to Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services. If the people on the road down the Mount of Olives cheered Jesus as the King, they were seriously misguided, we think. The first sermon I ever preached as a seminary student was on Palm Sunday, and the theme of it was that Jesus accepts our misguided praise. It was beyond my reach that the people in the crowd might be right.

In the past few years there has been a resurgence of interest in preaching "the kingdom of God." We have been reminded that Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God—that is, the *kingship* of God, the idea that God is the King of the world, and that Jesus' whole life and ministry were about showing what that kingship was like. Scot McKnight, an evangelical scholar, published a book in 2011 called *The King Jesus Gospel*. He argues that most of us preach salvation from personal sin, but not the gospel, the good news that God has become king through Jesus and now reigns. Last year, the Anglican N. T. Wright, who has taught on this theme for years, released a book with the title *When God Became King*. He says that we have lost sight of the basic theme of the gospels in which images of kingship and coronation are dominant, although often in ironic ways to point to the difference between Jesus' kingship and the kind we are used to.

I have been rediscovering this myself in recent years, which is why I often return to the theme of the kingdom of God and what it means to live in it. I have reminded you that we pray every week "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We have been taught by Jesus to ask not that we would be carried away to his kingdom in heaven, but that his kingdom would be established on earth so that we humans and all creation would fulfill God's intentions.

What happens if we read the story of Palm Sunday not as misplaced enthusiasm of the hoi polloi or evidence of human fickleness, but as a planned revelation by Jesus that he is in fact the King of Israel? Clearly Jesus had this planned out. He had arranged for a donkey colt, with a password to be given to the owner. He set up a parade with himself on the colt while everyone else walked. He rode into Jerusalem, the capital city, to claim his proper authority, and the crowd recognized this. The best word to describe what Jesus was doing is that he led a "demonstration," in the manner of Dr. King. This was a public demonstration, both claiming kingship for Jesus and mocking both Roman and Jewish ideas of what a king should be. In fact, the passage we read from Luke is the story of *two* demonstrations—the mock coronation parade and the "occupy temple" moment of protesting the corrupt religious system, with a scene of Jesus crying in between.

N. T. Wright gave a Palm Sunday sermon two years ago in which he compared Palm Sunday to the "perfect storm" that happened off George's Bank, made famous in the book by Sebastian Junger and the movie starring George Clooney. There was a wind from the west, high pressure at home, and a hurricane—all hitting at once. The three forces that met on Palm Sunday were the Roman Empire coming from the west, overheated nationalism among the Jews, and the unpredictable wind of God.

It's easy to see how the Roman and Jewish forces clashed. Rome only became an empire after Julius Caesar was killed and Octavian took over as Augustus Caesar. Rome then called Julius a god, and called Augustus the Son of God. When Augustus Caesar died, in Jesus' lifetime, he too was made a god, and the emperor Tiberias was named the Son of God. When Roman Empire blew into new territory, they spread the message that they called "good news:" "Good news! We have an emperor! The Son of God has become the King of the world!" The entire story of Jesus is told in that kind of language for a reason. Think of how the first gospel, Mark, begins: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah (anointed King), the Son of God." Mark goes on to tell how the king's coming was foretold by John, and how when Jesus was immersed by John a voice from heaven spoke saying "You are my Son." Then the very first words out of Jesus' mouth are "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news."

Friends, the gospel is the story of the arrival of a new king or a new empire. But that gospel is also couched in terms of a very old story, the story of Israel. You will remember that Israel became a nation when God kicked Egyptian butt and turned a group of slaves into a nation that could be a light to all the other nations. Who was the king of Israel then? Was it Moses? No. The only king was Yahweh, the Lord himself. After several centuries, the people decided they wanted a human king like all the other nations. Samuel, the man of God told them, "If you get a king he'll take your sons for soldiers and take your daughters for wives and tax you to death. Are you sure you want that?" The people insisted yes, so they got Saul, a failed king, David, a flawed success, then Solomon, successful but decadent. Then the kingship went all to hell with civil war and corrupt politicians and eventual defeat first by Assyria then by Babylon. There was no human king at all for centuries, and Jews had the sense that God was also gone. They longed for God to come back and retake his throne through the Messiah, his chosen king. They knew that Herod was not that king, but a puppet propped up by the Romans.

And so in Jesus' time this longing for God to come back was merged with the desire for Israel to come back—in the same way some might think of America "coming back," coming back in military power and national pride. The Jews still believed that their story had a goal to it, that God was not finished with them and someday he would establish his kingdom again. That's what they are hearing when Jesus talks about "the kingdom of God," and what they are thinking on Palm Sunday, just before the Passover. The Passover was their Fourth of July when Jews remembered how God had saved them from one superpower and feasted in hope that God would save them from the current superpower. As N. T. Wright puts it, "Jesus chose the Passover to make his crucial move."

He started with a parade. Rome was famous for its parades. Whenever they conquered a country they would come back and march through their equivalent of "the canyon of heroes," with the general in a chariot, surrounded by soldiers and horses and weapons, with conquered POWs and slaves and women in tow, and holding up prizes they had stolen from the vanquished nation. If you go to Rome, you can still see the Arch of Titus, the model for the arches in Paris and in Washington Square, which was built to celebrate Titus' defeat of the Jews. In one frieze you can see the menorah taken from the Temple when they destroyed the Temple.

Jesus stages a mock parade in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is a wacky demonstration—not silly like the Polish Day Parade on Block Island, but crazy like some protest demonstrations in which people wear Bush masks or Obama masks or carry big puppets or have skeletons waving flags. Jesus intentionally "mocked the powers," to use Scot McKnight's phrase. This parade was "palpably ironic." Instead of riding into town on a chariot or on a war-horse, Jesus rode on a young donkey. The gospel writers see this intended as an enactment of a prophecy of Zechariah of a king who comes in peace instead of in war. The crowd calls out to Jesus, in Luke's gospel, as the king. They shout "Blessed is the king!" In other gospels they call him "The Son of David," which is another title for the expected

Messiah. They also call him “the one who is coming”—a title used by Martha at tomb of Lazarus when she says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming.” Jesus is the king who is coming in the name of the Lord, coming in the name of Yahweh, coming in Yahweh’s place to take Yahweh’s throne.

Jesus’ parade mocks the Roman tradition and Jewish expectation of a nationalistic savior at the same time. His kingdom, his power, and his glory were different from those expected by Romans or Jews. Maybe you remember the scene in *Jesus Christ Superstar* in which Jesus is approaching Jerusalem and Simon the Zealot tells Jesus to mount a proper revolution. “You’ll get the power and the glory,” he says, “forever and ever and ever.” Jesus turns and sings, “Neither you, Simon, nor the fifty thousand; nor the Romans, nor the Jews; nor Judas, nor the Twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes, nor doomed Jerusalem itself—understand what power is, understand what glory is, understand at all.”

Jesus is a different kind of King with a different kind of power, but there can be no mistaking the elements of coronation that run through the story of this week. It climaxes in the passion narrative when Jesus is dressed in a robe and a crown after being whipped and presented to the crowd: “Behold your King.” The sign placed over his head announces who he is: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” When he dies, a Roman centurion says, “Surely this man was the Son of God”—a title that in both Roman and Jewish tradition referred to the King. The gospel of John repeatedly refers to the whole process of being crucified as being “lifted up” and “glorified.” The layers of irony in all four gospels as they tell the story of the cross are thick, thick, thick—so thick that some have wondered if the gospels are not the source of the deep sense of irony that characterizes western culture, an irony that the North Koreans and Chinese don’t seem to get.

If you doubt that Jesus is self-aware of himself as King, consider what he does immediately following the parade. As he draws near Jerusalem, surveying his capital, Jesus says, “If only you had recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” If only you had recognized that your embrace of nationalism will lead to destruction. If only you had recognized me as your King—but, as John says, he came to his own, and his own received him not. Then Jesus announces the consequence of rejecting his path of peace: the Romans will crush you to the ground and not leave one stone standing. And why is this? “Because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” Wow! Jesus understands his coming into the city as a King as Israel’s visitation from God.

And then what does Jesus do? He goes straight to the Temple for a second demonstration. He is a one-man Occupy movement. He occupies the outer court of the Temple, the Court of the Gentiles, which had been co-opted by Jews for buying and selling lambs and birds and changing currency. I think Jesus’ protest here is both against the lack of concern for Gentiles, who had no other place to pray to the true God, and against the entire corrupt religious system in which hypocrites who cared nothing for the poor could come to the Temple and celebrate their goodness. Jesus turns over the tables, and for as long as his demonstration lasted—maybe just a few minutes—he closed down the whole Temple system and no one could come in. No wonder the religious leaders kept looking for a way to kill him.

It is not a mystery that Jesus was acclaimed a King on Sunday and executed on Friday. It is not a contradiction; it is cause and effect. It was *because* Jesus was claiming to restore God’s rule over Israel that he was a threat to both Romans and to religious leaders.

We cannot read this story as if it had no politics in it. We cannot imagine that they killed Jesus just to fulfill prophecy. We must not miss the point that Jesus was establishing God as the King of the world, and the powers of this world, the religious-political-military-industrial complex, did not want to see that happen. N. T. Wright said in *Simply Jesus*,

The disciples want a kingdom without a cross. Many would-be “orthodox” or “conservative” Christians in our world would have a cross without a kingdom, an abstract “atonement” that would have nothing to do with the world except to provide the means of escaping it (p. 173).

This Palm Sunday, let’s reflect on what it means that Jesus came to make God the King of Israel again and King of the world. He did not come to establish theocracy as we think of it, in which men tell others what to do in the name of God. He came to establish a kingdom of peace in which influence comes through service and our forgiveness by God is so widely understood that we have no need to condemn one another. Let us not act as if the story of the cross and resurrection are a private matter for the forgiveness of our personal sins only. Let us awaken to the reality that in the cross and resurrection God was saving the whole world and beginning to transform it by his rule.