

YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU

MATTHEW 21:1-11; PHILIPPIANS 2-5-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I've taken the title of my sermon this morning from Matthew 21:5, which is a quote from Zechariah 9:9.

Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you...

The all-important question that is raised each year on Palm Sunday is how?

How is this king coming?

How did he come to Jerusalem two thousand or so years ago? How does he come to the world today? How does he come to you and me?

What kind of a king is this? And what does the nature of his coming do for you, for me, for the world?

A few weeks ago I encountered a quote from Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama:

We do not tell stories as they are; we tell stories as we are... We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.¹

¹ Pádraig Ó Tuama, *In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), 232.

I'm not sure what your first reaction is to this quote. Perhaps you think it sounds a little bleak, a little pessimistic about human beings and our ability to see and speak truly.

But for me, it speaks to the basic truth that as human beings, we see what we want to see, what we expect to see, what it's in our own interests to see.

We see this throughout Scripture.

The Hebrew prophets were forever chastising the people for having eyes but not seeing, ears but not hearing.

The Apostle Paul reminded his protégé Timothy that people will always be tempted to believe what suits their own desires: "they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3).

We could recall the story of the man born blind that we looked at a few weeks ago, which ends with Jesus saying that those who think they see clearly are the ones who are blind and those who are aware of their blindness are the ones who will be give the gift of sight.

This basic human tendency is obviously inflamed in our day by the media and technological waters that we daily swim in. It is frequently noted that it has never been easier to access only those media sources that confirm what we already believe about the world, to screen out any and all voices that offer different opinions or perspectives, whether we're talking about the news of the day or any of the issues that tend to get people worked up.

Cultural commentators refer to this as the "filter bubble." We increasingly live and move in self-selecting worlds.

So, all of this is to say that I think the quote by Pádraig Ó Tuama expresses an important truth about human beings and a very biblical one.

We are prone to seeing what we want to see, hearing what we want to hear. We don't tell stories as they are, we tell them as *we* are.

The way in which we tell a story very often says at least as much about us—about our hopes and fears and anxieties and expectations—as it does about the story itself.

So what does this have to do with Palm Sunday?

The passage in Matthew narrates a celebratory scene of joy, of jubilation, of expectancy and hope.

The palm branches echo earlier, happier times, when Israel's kings ruled in Jerusalem.

The loud "hosannas," which literally meant "save us" but also were used for more generic expressions of praise for the king also call to mind ancient glories and the fulfillment of long promised hopes.

This is a celebratory text. Israel's king had come to Jerusalem.

But we who know more of the story than that Jerusalem throng, know that the story people *wanted* to be told, the story that their ears itched to hear and their eyes were eager to see, was not the one that God was in fact telling.

We know that these bright scenes will soon turn dark. We know that glad and expectant "hosannas" will turn into angry "crucify him's."

We know that at least some of the very people who hail Jesus as their coming king at the city gates will in a few short days be calling for his blood.

At the centre of this big story that marks the high point of the Christian year is a massive collision between what people want and expect from their God and what they get.

N.T. Wright calls this text from Matthew "an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God's answer."²

The people in Jesus' day knew what they wanted from God and from God's anointed one.

² N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 69.

They wanted a mighty king to rule from Jerusalem. They wanted the Romans out and a Jewish king in.

They wanted punishment for their enemies—all those who had held their boots over their necks for long years. They wanted a righteous king and the fulfillment of all they had hoped for since they had been exiled centuries earlier.

But this king is... different. Unpredictable. Unsettling. Surprising!

This king walks the dusty pilgrim path up to Jerusalem at Passover time, fully aware of the eager crowd waiting expectantly for him to do what they've been wanting him to do and...

... asks for a donkey to ride on.

Not a warhorse, as befits a conquering hero, but a donkey, in fulfillment of the vision of peace declared by the prophet Zechariah.

This is an interesting way for a king to arrive on the scene.

Many commentators have suggested that this scene is a kind of subversive “street theatre” performance whereby Jesus is directly challenging the Romans about what true power and kingship looked like.

This king comes with gentleness and humility.

This king will bring peace not through the sword, but, only a week later, through laying down his life for his friends and for his enemies.

This king will defeat evil, but, at least initially, by subjecting himself to its worst.

This is not the sort of king the people want. Not even those closest to Jesus.

We see this only a few short verses prior to this passage where James and John are jostling for who will get the position of power and influence once Jesus sets up his kingdom in Jerusalem.

Despite Jesus repeatedly hinting or explicitly stating that he is going to Jerusalem to die, the disciples either misunderstand him or refuse to believe him.

Despite the hints from Zechariah and Isaiah and other prophets about the suffering servant and the humble king, this wasn't the story people wanted to hear and so it wasn't the one that they told with their palm branches and their hosannas and their great expectations of the king who came to them, riding on a donkey.

It is easy to look back at those who misunderstood the nature of Jesus' kingdom and kingship, and think, "How could their expectations have been so off the mark?"

But one of my deepest convictions is that the story of Scripture is our story, too. It is a mirror that shows us ourselves. If we simply hear this story as a story about *them* and not about *us*, we will have not heard well.

And one of the uncomfortable questions we must ask is if we are so different from those eager throngs of expectant worshipers on that first Palm Sunday.

Do we also tend to tell the story of God not as it is but as we are? Do our expectations of this king reflect who he really is or who we want him to be in our world and in our lives?

Right near the end of our gospel text, we read these words:

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "***Who is this?***"

This is a question that has resounded down through the ages, even from before Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Who is this?

And I think we are still asking this question all these years later.

Who is this king? Why doesn't he behave in more kingly ways? Why doesn't he act more God-like?

Why doesn't he fix my problems? Why isn't he there for me when I need him?

Why does this king ask so much of me and seemingly give so little in return?

Why does this king sometimes leave me with more questions than answers?

Why does suffering have to be part of his story? Of our stories?

Why can't Jesus' kingship mean that I am guaranteed a life of victory and health and wealth? (i.e., Joel Osteen)

Why can't I have this king on my own terms?

As human beings, we tend to want what we want from God when we want it. We want God to validate our assumptions, our preferences, our view of how the world works or ought to work.

What Palm Sunday and the entire narrative of Holy Week does is give us God on God's terms.

It gives us a king who turns over tables in the temple in judgment of those who had commercialized what was supposed to be a house of prayer, a king who weeps in a garden, a king who washes his disciples' feet, a king who shares a meal with his betrayer.

And, of course ultimately it gives us a king whose throne is a cross and whose coronation is a crown of thorns.

But it does more than just show us who our king is. It invites us to imitate him.

At the end of our service today, the last words we will hear before we move out into Holy Week come from Philippians 2:5-11.

In it, Paul quotes what many scholars believe to be one of the oldest hymns or poems of the church, probably written only a few years after the first Easter.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

In our relationships with one another, in our families, our workplaces, our church, our *lives...* we are to have *this* mindset.

Because this was our king's mindset, as he wobbled into Jerusalem on the back of a little donkey.

So today, on Palm Sunday, we along with those Jerusalem crowds encounter a king who does not dance to our tune, a king who is unlike any other.

This king who comes to us does not always give us what we want.

But, as the events of the next days and weeks will make clear—and as we will spend our whole lives trying to understand and apply and embrace—this king does give us what we need.

Thanks be to God.

