

“Recognizing the King”

Introduction: Did you know that there’s a presidential race going on?! The good news (haha) is that we’re going to be treated to almost eight more months of this rather unimaginable drama. If you sit back and try to look at things a bit analytically, it’s worth asking what it is that is driving the electorate, those who are out there voting in the primaries. They’re looking, they say, for a strong leader, one who is going to keep us safe from our enemies, grow our economy, and make us all wealthy, comfortable, and happy. You hear this in the various campaign slogans: “He’s reigniting the promise of America. She’s campaigning for America. He’s going to restore the American dream for hardworking families. He’s going to make America great again.”

Now what’s kind of interesting is that those sentiments are not so very different from what the people of Jesus’ day were expressing when a man came riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, on the day we’ve come to know as Palm Sunday. In fact, Palm Sunday might best be compared to a political convention in which the party candidate is selected and proclaimed to the nation. The Jews who had flocked to Jerusalem were looking for a new leader, a king, who would overthrow Caesar and his oppressive Roman government, and restore Israel to power and glory over the nations of the world in the land that God had promised them.

The challenge is that this Jesus was a very different kind of king than most were imagining or hoping for. By the end of the week he turned out to be a king that they had great difficulty recognizing and seeing clearly. On the one hand, he was the ultimate outsider, having nothing to do with either the Roman or Jewish leadership. But on the other hand, he, as the Son of God, was the ultimate insider, the king of the Kingdom of God. Above all, he had come to bring justice and peace in a far different way than was expected. Do we have eyes to see this? I’d like us to begin looking just outside of Jericho, where the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem began. What hints did Jesus drop along the way to help us recognize the nature of his campaign, of his kingdom and reign?

I. Jericho

A. If you were to consult your Israeli Mountain Guide (if there is such a thing), you would learn that the trail from Jericho to Jerusalem was eighteen miles in length. You’d further discover, if you looked closely, that Jericho is situated at 1,825 feet *below* sea level, and that Jerusalem is at 2,500 feet above it. If you do the math, this means that if you decide to take this journey, you are in for an elevation gain of close to 4,500 feet, quite a significant rise. In other words, this was one long hill workout Jesus was traveling with his disciples and I imagine they covered it slowly and thoughtfully.

B. I say thoughtfully because just as they were approaching Jericho, where this last leg would begin, Jesus pulled his disciples aside and told them this:

We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again. [Lk. 18:31-34]

Although this was the third time Jesus had spoken to his disciples about his suffering, death, and resurrection, they still were struggling to comprehend it. As Luke goes on to describe, “The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.” And indeed, who could blame them? These were difficult

words. At the very least, the suffering part did not describe, in their minds, what a true Messiah would do, and certainly on a human level, it was all quite hard to figure out.

C. With this in mind, what happens next is intriguing. As this group of hikers got back on the trail and came into Jericho, they bumped into a man who was begging by the side of the road. Turns out he was not only poor but blind. When he learned it was Jesus who was walking by, he cried out. Jesus stopped, asked the man what he wanted, and the man said, “Lord, I want to see” (18:41). Jesus opened the man’s eyes, and the man fell into step with the group. Certainly, it was an act of mercy of the part of Jesus. But could it also have been something like an acted parable, showing that to recognize this king, to see him clearly, he needs to open our eyes?

D. The action continues when, as the group made its way through Jericho, Jesus stopped and looked up into a sycamore tree. Remember who he saw there? It was a short little rascal by the name of Zacchaeus. He wanted desperately to see Jesus but because of the crowd, and his stature, he needed to climb a tree to do so. As the old Sunday school song goes, “Now Zacchaeus, he was small, but the people, they were tall. And the Lord loved Zacchaeus better than them all.” I’m not sure about the theology of that last statement—Jesus doesn’t love some people better than others—but the shock of this episode is that Jesus loved this fellow at all! As the crowd looking on expressed it, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner!” Zacchaeus, recall, was a tax collector. And in that day, that meant that he was no better than a traitor, a stooge for the Roman government, who was not only collecting for the enemy, but extorting money for himself in the process. But, in his grace, Jesus invites himself to the home of this crook, and when Zacchaeus responds to this grace, Jesus welcomes him into the family of God:

Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. [19:9-10]

This King, in other words, had not come to make the life of the religious and social elites more comfortable. He had come to talk with tax collectors, to party with prostitutes, to lay his hands on lepers, to feed the hungry, to visit those in prison, to encourage people to love their enemies and not to kill but to pray for those who were persecuting them, and to call people to repentance. The nature and agenda of this King’s kingdom, in other words, was radically different from what many expected. It was hard for them to accept.

E. While they were taking this all in, Jesus went on to tell them a parable. It’s actually one of the ways we used to help our girls when they were little persevere through hikes that were getting difficult. We’d tell them stories to take their minds off the difficulty of the hill we were all climbing. Jesus told this story to help his followers think about the already not yet nature of the kingdom. “. . . he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once” (19:11).

The parable is about a man of noble birth, referring to Jesus, who went to a distant country to be appointed king. After a time, he would return. But in the meantime, his people were to be good stewards of all that he had given them. As Jesus spins the parable out, we see that some were and some were not. But one of the main points of the parable is that the kingdom of God has only been inaugurated with the first coming of Jesus. It will be consummated, or brought to its completion, with his return.

F. To those who, in the first century, still felt like they were in exile, having returned to Jerusalem but because of the oppressive Roman rule, it felt no different to them than their time in Babylon, this was hard to take. In many ways, it is hard for us to take. How long, O Lord, we cry out, until you put all this suffering and evil away? But in fact, this delay is good news. For, if Jesus, in his first coming, had come to *bring* justice, if he’d come, like most expected the messianic king would come, with a sword in his hand to destroy all forms of evil, we’d all be in serious trouble.

None of us would be able to stand because none of us can measure up to the standard he holds. There would be no human beings left! But as the cross and resurrection would reveal, Jesus actually came the first time to *bear* justice, to take God's just penalty for our sin upon himself. He came not with a sword in his hand but allowing nails to be pierced through his hands. Through his death and resurrection, he began to create a people who can be healed of the injustice in their own heart, and are then called to oppose the injustice they find in their communities and world. In the process, the world's peoples have been given time and opportunity to repent and join in this kingdom life.

II. Jerusalem

A. Now, when Jesus and his disciples finally arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus put a final exclamation point on all that he had been saying and doing by choosing to ride into town on a donkey and not a horse. A horse would have been the choice of a king who had come to go to war against his enemies with a sword. But a donkey would have been ridden by one who had come to make peace. And his primary weapon would be, as the coming week would reveal, a cross. With this weapon, Jesus would begin the reconciliation process, to use the term we've met in Colossians, with all things, with God, with ourselves, with our neighbor, and with the rest of creation.

B. The king who comes in the name of the Lord had definitely arrived, but as the crowd would see by week's end, he would work things out much differently than anticipated. He was running a very different campaign than they'd expected. He hadn't come to make people happy or wealthy or safe or comfortable. He had come to bring a way of love that was about self-sacrifice, not self-interest. He had come to offer a way of power that creates, sustains, and heals rather than dominate or destroy. He had come to embody a way of community that seeks to include not exclude. He had come to call people to a way of living that sees creation as a garden to be tended, not a warehouse to be exploited and consumed. That's what was on this king's agenda. May he give us eyes to see this agenda clearly, and may it be our agenda, too.