
Today is Palm Sunday – but let me first take you a few days ahead, to Friday morning.

1. Are you the King? Jesus claims our allegiance.

Pilate has just sat down in the place of judgement. Turning to Jesus, he asks, ***Are you the king of the Jews?*** Jesus replies, *My kingship is not of this world. If it were, my servants would have fought... My kingship does not derive from the world. You are a king, then!*, says Pilate... (*John 18:36,37*)

And it was on the basis of this claim that Jesus was condemned to die. For the cross bore this placard, ***This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*** (*Matt 27:37*)

Five days earlier, ***when Jesus set out from Bethany*** to go into Jerusalem – ***he deliberately chose to do it in a way that the Jews could not mistake.*** Jesus had commanded – either by pre-arrangement or by supernatural knowledge – the use of an unriden donkey. His disciples had spread their cloaks on the beast and Jesus had ridden on it into Jerusalem.

Great crowds had welcomed him like a king, carpeting his way with their garments – as, long ago Jehu had been acclaimed king (*2 Kings 9:13*). The people had cut down palm branches and waved them excitedly, with shouts and acclamations – as they had done two centuries before, when Simon Maccabaeus had entered Jerusalem after one of his most notable victories (*1 Macc 13:51*) and again when Simon returned to cleanse the Temple after its defilement by the pagan conqueror Antiochus Epiphanes (*2 Macc 10:7*).

Clearly Jesus was claiming to be God's Messiah – God's Anointed King – as well as the true cleanser of the Temple precincts – even the Court of the Gentiles! – not from *pagan* defilement, but from *Jewish* exploitation and abuse. And Jesus was doing this in

Jesus, the crowds & us.

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday 2020

Lift up your heads, O you gates,
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory?
The LORD Almighty -
He is the King of glory.
(*Psalm 24:9-10*)

fulfilment of specific prophecies: *Rejoice greatly...Daughter of Jerusalem, See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech 9:9) And: Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord Almighty. (Mal 3:1)*

Surely nothing could be plainer! **Why had Jesus never done this before?** Because only now was the time right. He knew his hour was at hand when he would be delivered up to his enemies and crucified – but not before he had made plain **his claim to the allegiance, love and trust of God's people** – which alone could bring them peace, and salvation from coming judgement. (Luke 19:41-46; John 12:23-33)

In fact, of course, Jesus by his teaching and gracious actions has all along made it clear what his claims are. To refer to just one occasion, we could go back to **that time when John the Baptist**, that fearless forerunner and herald of Jesus, was in prison and sent men to Jesus, because he **was in doubt** whether Jesus really was God's anointed king.

What answer did Jesus give John? It was a profoundly appropriate one. Only **God** could bear him unimpeachable testimony – and that in two ways. By **revealing** that *Jesus was fulfilling Scriptures* that spoke about him. And by **displaying in him God's power** to work miraculous healing and deliverance.

Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor... (Matt 11:4,5) Jesus is quoting from two passages, widely held to speak about the Messiah. (Isaiah 35:5,6 and 61:1)

Of course, such testimony and such miracles – which told of the powerful breaking in of God's kingdom – did not lead *everyone* to repent and believe. **The crowds** saw the same miracles, but it only became a matter for discussion (Matt 12:23). **The Pharisees** saw

them, and attributed Jesus' power to the devil. (Matt 12:24). **Only those who have a childlike trust and teachableness are able** to receive the truth about Jesus.

*I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. **All things have been committed to me by my Father.** No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.** (Matt 11:25-28)*

In these words, Jesus quietly claims to be at **the very centre of God's self-disclosure**. He fulfils all the Old Testament's hopes, and in a dark world, lit only by candles, comes as a blazing searchlight.

Jesus maintains that God the Father conceals and reveals according to his will. **We cannot know God and Christ by our own efforts** – but only as God reveals them to us. Jesus claims fully to represent God, with all the authority of the Father, and he comes with God's own claim on human hearts.

No human being can fully understand Jesus – only God himself. And only Jesus fully understands the Father. He's not claiming to know something **about** God, or even **everything** about God. Jesus claims to **know God** himself, absolutely! Astounding!

And because Jesus shares both God's nature and ours – **he alone can introduce us: Come to me..and I will give you rest!** No other man has ever made such claims – and justified them by his life and character.

2. What is truth? Jesus proclaims his character.

Jesus answered Pilate, *My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this I was born; for this I came into the world, and all who are not*

deaf to the truth listen to my voice. Pilate said, **What is truth?** (John 18:37,38)

That day, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, in fulfilment of prophecy, riding on a donkey – rather than a horse – **he was proclaiming the sort of king he was claiming to be.** He was coming in peace, not on a war-horse, as a conqueror. Not to in the might of arms, but in the strength of love. Coming in lowly fashion, **not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.** (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45)

The next verses in Zechariah's prophecy (Zech 9:10-11) are not quoted by the gospel writers, probably because they knew they have, as yet, had only a partial fulfilment. **God's kingdom has arrived with the coming of the King – but its fulfilment awaits his return.** These verses speak of God's disarming Israel; the end of war and belligerence. **He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth. As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit...**

The prophet had expressed this wonderful assurance in the language and circumstances of his time, but its meaning and application to Jesus are clear. God is intending to bring in a universal peace – to do away with hatred and warfare among men. But he will **only** do this by means, **first of all**, of a more profound liberation than freeing prisoners of war.

For, contrary to modern thought – **we are each personally responsible to God for our actions.** We cannot blame our upbringing, the short-comings of society, or economic forces. God affirms our human dignity and worth by holding **us** to blame for our disobedience, however much it is in our nature to be inclined to do evil. We are guilty sinners, deserving his anger.

But because of the death of his Son, through **his** shed blood, God will free men and women from the bondage of sin, that shuts them up to an eternal condemnation. **So great is God's love**, his grace and mercy – so sure his plan and purpose. **This is the truth to which Jesus was bearing witness.**

But the crowds that day had another agenda, a totally different conception of the rôle of God's king. Stirred by all that they had seen and heard of Jesus' deeds (John 12:18; Luke 19:37), convinced by them that God had anointed him with power, they cast him in the rôle of heroic deliverer from the yoke of Rome, just as David had, from the oppression of the Philistines: *Hosanna to the Son of David!*

But Jesus is much more than the Son of David. As he said, a day or two later, *How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls the Messiah 'Lord'? For David says – Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 – The LORD says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet" – If then David calls him 'Lord', how can he [just] be his son?* (Matt 22:43-45)

But the eyes of the crowd – like those of his own disciples, disputing who would be greatest in the kingdom – were firmly **fixed on an earthly salvation.** *Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!* (Mark 11:10) They were eager to make Jesus their king – as they had tried to do once before (John 6:15) – but only so **he** could do **their** bidding, march to their drum-beat, bring glory to **themselves.** *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!* (Matt 21:9; Psa 118:26) But it wasn't the Lord they were seeking to honour.

Unawares, they were being the mouth-piece of Satan, who had shown Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, and had said, *All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me.* (Matt 4:8,9).

But – as Jesus was so soon to say – the two greatest commandments are, **Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and, Love your neighbour as yourself.** (Matt 22:37-39) *Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.* (John 15:13)

Jesus is like no other king or political ruler. Earthly kings send their people into battle to win victories. But this king won his victory,

on behalf of his people, by his **own** death. Earthly potentates maintain the mystique of leadership by keeping a distance from those they rule. But **this king showed his love for his people** by washing their feet, healing their diseases and befriending his lowest subjects. **The Zealots** – and millions since – **believed they could restore an earthly paradise by force and bloodshed.** Jesus knew that only **his** shed blood could bring reconciliation between God and man, and subsequently between man and man.

Those that follow Jesus are to have **his** agenda, and walk in **his** footsteps. All along Jesus had taught that **the values and methods of his kingdom** are **utterly unlike** those of the unbelieving world. But they alone can change men's hearts and lives from within. Force can **coerce** men to behave in certain ways, but **only the grace and love of God** can give men and women the desire and motivation **to serve him freely.**

3. What shall I do with Jesus? Jesus challenges us.

What shall I do then with Jesus, who is called the Messiah? Pilate asked the crowds. **Crucify him!**, they shouted. (*Matt 27:22; Mark 15:12,13*)

The crowds, when it became apparent that Jesus was following no revolutionary, worldly agenda, soon abandoned their enthusiastic homage – and **chose Barabbas**, the Zealot leader, instead.

Shall I crucify your king? Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. (John 19:15)

Pilate's questions are as relevant today as they were when first uttered. For **the choice remains – will we make Jesus our king**, at whatever cost to ourselves, trust him as our Saviour and obey him as our Lord.

Or will we follow the crowds and those who influenced them, with shallow understanding of God's plan, intent on worldly advantage and earthly reward. Content to give some outward worship, but **deep down refusing to have him as king** over our lives, resenting

his intrusion into our agendas, so that in effect it is **we** who say, **Crucify him!**

You see, **it is not possible to be neutral** – to admire from afar, but not become personally involved. By our very inaction we have cast our vote. Like Pilate who was convinced of Jesus' innocence, and did not want to be coerced into satisfying the hatred of the Jewish leaders – **we must ultimately choose.** Fear of the consequences of going against their wishes, and love of his present power and status – determined Pilate's choice. And they, or similar reasons, can determine ours.

But that needn't be the case. When the cock crowed and the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, Peter remembered what the Lord had said – and he went outside and wept bitterly. **We too need to weep for our sins**, and betrayals of Jesus' love towards us – **and come to him for forgiveness**, and a renewed opportunity and strength to love and serve him.