

A King Unlike Any Other
March 29th, 2015

Mark 11:1-10
Palm Sunday B

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What do you look for in a leader? What qualities do you think make a leader great? What is it about someone that makes you willing to follow them? Certainly you're going to want someone smart. You're going to want someone capable of handling the difficulties they are going to face on your behalf, whether that means they need to be strong or quick-witted or cunning. Probably most importantly you want someone that you feel genuinely cares about you and is going to look after your best interest.

Of course, in our society we have the benefit of being choosy about our leaders. Doesn't mean we always get the ones we want, but at least we have a say in the matter. In other times and in other countries, leaders aren't always chosen. Some inherit, some seize power. Many who seek that power shouldn't be allowed to have it. In theory a king was to exemplify all the characteristics we value in a leader, they were to lead the people for their own good. They were to defend the people and face the challenges of the populace on their behalf. In practice, of course, it became something much different.

When we think of a king outside of a religious context, we probably think of the negative examples. The selfish dictator, stepping on whomever they needed to in order to secure their own personal pleasure and glory. Even those that served the interest of their people and their land demanded privilege to go with it. They insisted on the honor and reverence due to them for their leadership and skills that kept the people safe and the country running. If there was a battle to be fought, they sent others to do it. If there was a dirty job to do at home, it was the underlings who carried it out. All while the man at the top got the gold and the parades and the praises.

This stands in startling contrast to what we see of our true King Jesus this morning. We see the procession year after year and perhaps some of us are a little too accustomed to the sight of it. But look again at this entry to Jerusalem the Sunday before his death: <Read text: Mark 11:1-10>.

To many of us, this stands in obvious contrast to the end of the week. Here on Sunday, the crowds wave those palm branches, that symbol of victory. They throw their cloaks along the ground to provide him a clean path to pass on. They shout his praises as he enters. We watch this, knowing that many of these people would be screaming for his blood by the end of the week. Even the most devout walking alongside would abandon him. But that is not the only contrast that is unusual here. The entry itself is a study in contradiction.

Here are the people, shouting the praises of their King, singing glory to God's chosen, to the one that has come to save them all. Sure, they maybe didn't understand how he came to save them, but as they sing his praises that is immaterial. They give him the glory he deserves, they honor him with the branches and the cloaks. But look again at whom they are honoring. He's not wearing fine purple linens, he's not covered in gold or jewels. He's got a simple cloak and sandals. He's not even really all that clean. And look at what he's riding. Not a fine war-horse, not even a camel, just a young donkey. And where are his attendants, his servants, his train of wealth and riches? All he has with him are a dozen guys that don't look any more impressive than he, himself does.

Why the praises for this guy? Why the glory given to him? As usual, on the outside, it doesn't make sense. But we have the benefit of having the truth revealed to us by the Holy Spirit know what is happening. We can see underneath and beyond and understand that what is happening is entirely appropriate.

There can be no question in our minds that despite how this looked, Jesus entirely deserved the praises sung to him. Deserved them more than any king who had a parade in his own honor. Rather than insisting he be praised to prop up his own ego, Jesus truly merited the praise and honor that was given him here. For one, he really was the King. A king unlike any other king that has ever lived. In fact, the King from which all others derive. We see just one small example of his authority at the start of our reading. Jesus knew this was how he was to enter Jerusalem. He knew the type of ride he would come in on, he knew right where the animal would be waiting for him to use. He knew this would fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah. He sent his disciples to retrieve the animal and just like when he would later send them to prepare the Passover, they found this exactly as he said.

Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. This alone is sufficient reason for his praises to be sung. He truly does rule all. He is truly responsible for all that happens to us. For every breath we draw, for every bite of food we take, for every moment we are clothed and sheltered and kept safe, he is responsible. It continues because he wills it, because he grants it in his authority. He deserves the honor and the praise. All other authority, from the kings of old to the government we are under now, only ever exist because he allows them to use authority on his behalf. Doesn't matter if they recognize this or not, they will still accomplish his will in the end (Of course, to them, personally there are consequences in not recognizing Jesus, but that's a different matter).

But then, these are praises that Jesus deserves always. Praises that the angels continually sing. This status as King over our world is a continuing one. The honor given to him here on Palm Sunday was unique because of the unique role he would fulfill as our King. The responsibility of a king is not just to lead, but to protect. And before our King could lead us and guide us, he needed to ensure our safety.

Because we had gotten ourselves in a heap of trouble. Sure we had help with it at the start. At the beginning God had an enemy, the devil. An angel who had chosen to defy God and as a result was cast out. In his anger, the devil swore to destroy anything God did, and so he went after the crown of God's creation, mankind. A special, unique creature, given a mind and will and soul. And created in the image of God, that is, holy and with a mind perfectly in sync with the will of its creator. The devil plied that creature with lies and promises of being God. And man rejected God.

And though we may have had help to get going, we've made a fine mess of the situation since then. God's creation was holy. His will is holy and just. And that which is not holy, that which is evil, must be removed. It must be cut out. It cannot be allowed to stand in God's perfection. That describes us perfectly. God created all that we are and all that we have and so he rightly deserves the honor and credit and praise for it. But instead we ignore God, we refuse to acknowledge him as the source of our blessings or we cry out to him that he hasn't given us enough or what we want. Instead of giving credit where credit is due, we complain and moan about what we don't have. And when God continues to not give us what we want, we turn on our neighbor to take it from him. Whether it's actual stealing or just hurting them with our actions so we can feel a little more built up. Every selfish cut in the holy fabric of God's universe demands retribution, demands that we be put to death, separated from him forever.

This death is our real enemy, the one we cannot defeat. It is the enemy we are lost to the moment we are born, the moment we are conceived, even. God, in his mercy, postpones that sentence for a time, giving us time to learn and know and trust in what our King did for us that we might be delivered from this enemy.

And that is, again, the act for which Christ was being praised as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Those shouting his praises likely didn't know it, but the praise was necessary nonetheless. In fact, what he was about to accomplish was so great, and the honor so necessary, that Jesus confessed if his praises were not shouted by men, the rocks themselves would cry out. All of creation waits to be delivered from the burden of sin and death, and that is exactly what Christ was riding into Jerusalem to accomplish.

You see, the glory of Christ our King is not measured in what he has or what he is. He is God, he has authority over everything and all of creation belongs to him. But as we saw last week, that is not where the glory shines brightest. His glory shines not in what he has, but in what he was willing to give up for the sake of others. He is God, but he gave that all up. He set aside all his power. He set aside all the wealth. He let silence the praises that should be sung to him. He gave up the perfect contentment and joy of heaven and he willingly took up torment, ridicule and death. He endured our fate in our place. Death was our enemy, but he fought death for us. And though he died, in doing so he triumphed. He rose from the grave and declared to us that death was defeated. His death counted as ours and there is no longer any need for us to die. We trust him, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We trust that we are forgiven and the death we die here is not a death but a sleep, a passing from a temporary life to an eternal life, bought with his blood, won by our King.

And now our King continues to lead us. He continues to rule this world. Not to create paradise here. Not even to create a theocracy here where every government enforces his laws. He rules this world to bring you to faith and keep you in that faith so you can leave this doomed world and return to him where you belong. He rules so that as many as possible may have the chance to hear this message and be rescued before the ship goes down forever. The chaos, the wars and the immorality that pervade the world as he accomplishes this do not mean that he has lost control. They simply mean that he has his sights set higher than fixing this broken place, his intention is to rescue us for something far better in the end.

Our King is unlike any other. At all times he has only our best in mind. At all times he is willing to do anything, endure anything, give up anything to rescue us, to make us his own and rescue us for eternity. May we take his example to heart in what remains of our lives here. And more importantly may we spend those days recognizing the praise and honor he deserves for his actions. As the stones themselves could not keep silent if his praises needed singing, may we respond the same way to what our King has done for us. May we be so filled and overwhelmed with his greatness that we cannot help but sing out to him with the praise and honor that our King truly deserves. Amen.