

All hail the King

Date: 2 April 2023

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Zechariah 9: 9, Psalm 118: 15-29, Matthew 21: 1-11, 27: 27-31, Philippians 2: 3-11

Thank you for your word and your Spirit that give life and growth.

Help us today to see clearly who Jesus is & to humbly bow before Him as our King.

[music – Zadok the priest]

Does anyone know this piece of music?

Handel composed "Zadok the Priest" for the coronation of the British monarch George II in 1727 and it has been performed at the coronation of every British monarch since then.

The bishops of the day suggested a Biblical text for Handel, and he is quoted as having said, "I have read my Bible very well, and shall choose for myself". So, the choir sings: "Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet Anointed Solomon King". The music builds & eventually culminates in a joyful "God save the King!"

Today's passages from Matthew show us two very different images of Jesus as King.

The first, in Matthew 21, could be seen as a coronation of sorts. There's a large crowd. They spread their cloaks on the road. They cut branches from the trees & spread them on the road. Those ahead of Jesus & those who followed shouted psalms. The whole city is stirred. Understandably. It's electrifying. "Who is this?" they ask.

Now Matthew is telling this story & he makes a little aside in v.4-5. "This took place to fulfill what was spoken to the prophet:

Say to the Daughter of Zion,
See your King comes to you,
gentle & riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey"

Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, people who would have known this prophecy & so he's eager to point out that this Jesus is fulfilling it; he's the long-awaited Messiah. Did you catch some of the parts from the OT readings we had – the donkey, shouts of joy, the city gates, the branches in hand, the festive procession? It's happening now! People are running alongside Jesus coming into the city where Jewish people know is the place where God is to be enthroned and worshipped.

The context of Zechariah 9 was that God will bless Jerusalem; that He would come because he loves and is jealous for the city & for its people; that God would overthrow the enemies of Israel & bring peace. Matthew is saying: this is your king! He's here. The Messiah is here!

And in v.10-11 the people ask, “Who is this?’ ... the crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’” Not everyone in the crowd is reading the room. They don’t all interpret the signs. For some at least, they’re simply seeing the Nazarene guy – the prophet.

That they didn’t see this may have had something to do with their expectations. & I can understand that. Where’s the chariot? Or the magnificent war horse? Perhaps they thought, ‘If he’s coming to save us, then why aren’t these symbols of power & rule coming with him?’

Jerusalem has been a political hotspot. The Babylonians, Persians, Alexander the Great with the Greeks & now the Romans had all staked their claim on it. Understandably, the Jews desperately wanted to be saved from political oppression & the humiliation of being ruled over by foreign powers.

And Jesus enters Jerusalem gentle - & riding on a donkey.

The ancient Greeks and Romans – the world Jesus had been living in – prized honour above virtually all else. To the Greeks humility was weak & despicable but Jesus made it the cornerstone of character.

Kings are associated with power, authority & privilege. Jesus had these in abundance; He created the world! He has the resources of the whole world at his fingertips! & yet, He enters Jerusalem in humility, with gentleness & riding on a donkey.

Is it any wonder the people ask, ‘Who is this?’

This week saw the *Survivor* finale on TV. It’s a reality show where, in this latest series, 24 people camp out on an island in Samoa. They compete in challenges and every couple of days they have a Tribal Council & vote for someone to leave the island. And after 94 days of play, self-proclaimed King George of Bankstown was front & centre of the action.

He had played in a previous series & before this latest game, he declared, “I’ve come to take back what’s rightfully mine – the crown that Hayley stole from me. I’m willing to do what it takes to get the job done.”

At the end of the series he said, “Glory or death wasn’t hyperbole, it was my strategy walking into Samoa on day one. I told myself I’m going to play the most glorious game in the history of *Survivor* and I did.”

Now, it is a game. King George’s tactics were manipulation, betrayal, lies and deceit. What a king! And what a contrast with king Jesus – who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In the Matthew 27 reading there are some symbols of kingship but the mood from ch. 21 is dramatically changed. Instead of Jesus being welcomed, now the crowd mocks.

They put a scarlet robe on Him – after he’s stripped.

They set a crown on his head – but it’s made of thorns that they’ve twisted together.

They put a staff in his hand - & then take it & use it to strike him on the head again & again.

They knelt in front of him & said, “Hail, king of the Jews!” - & then they led him away to crucify him.

The praise of Palm Sunday has turned to derision. He really is the King but this enthronement is done in mockery. He embodies a reign which is marked by weakness & humiliation – & it’s for people who treat him like this. The one who is entitled to all honour, lowers and empties himself. If ever anyone was entitled to cry out, “What about me? It isn’t fair!”, surely it was Jesus.

When Queen Elizabeth II died last year, there was one clip played repeatedly in the media from her 21st birthday. “I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service.” Politicians make their promises but, as often plays out, we see that words can be cheap. Queen Elizabeth was so admired because for her long reign, she matched what she said & served.

It was reported that she chose the readings & hymns for her funeral. I particularly loved that one of the hymns she chose contained these lines:

Till we cast our crowns before Thee
Lost in wonder, love & praise

She recognised that even her power & privilege which she had in abundance were a very faint shadow compared to a greater king whose power & rule is limitless and whose reign is timeless.

Now if our king Jesus embodies humility, then His followers are also invited to embody this same humility. The humble person is one who holds power in the service of others. Following Him means taking up the pattern of suffering & service, not grasping at glory like king George in Survivor.

The past few weeks I’ve recalled many beautiful examples of humility of followers of Jesus – often thankless tasks, done to serve. Humility is compelling.

The theologian, Karl Barth, said: “Sin is where we are the servant but try to be the Lord; whereas Christ is the Lord who comes to be our servant.”

Is it any wonder the crowd on the first Palm Sunday asked. 'Who is this?' On this Palm Sunday in 2023, who is Jesus to you?

On Wednesday this week Clara became an Australian citizen. Along with others from over a dozen countries, she pledged her loyalty to Australia and its people.

Today we are invited into citizenship of a different kind – not a nationality, but the Kingdom of God which is established in Christ. Its ruler is not like those who lord it over their subjects, nor use their power & privilege for their own ends. This King doesn't live for His own convenience. King Jesus rules from humility and sacrifice. He rules with justice and mercy. He rules a kingdom that will never end.

The majority rejected him. But a minority saw the signs – who he truly was - & bowed down in worship.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ... He humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place & gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow & every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the father.

This king is the one we love & seek to worship this Palm Sunday.

All hail the king!