

“A Kingly Welcome”

John 12:12-19

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The triumphal entry of Jesus is the beginning of the Passion of our Lord. It is what sets the wheels of Holy Week in motion, as it were. This is why, on this Sunday, the historic church traditionally read the entire Passion narrative as the Gospel lesson for the day. As this festal week begins, moving forward to the day of Passover, Jesus rides into Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna!” from a large crowd of pilgrims that have gathered to meet Him as He rides on toward the cross and suffering that awaits Him on Friday. But before that time, when He will have to die for the redemption of the world, He is greeted as He comes into the city with His disciples as if He was a king. The crowd, having heard the account of Lazarus and the other great deeds of Jesus, understand who He is and that He is the Son of David, the promised Messiah who will fulfill the Scriptures. He receives a kingly welcome. Although, for a man of humble means from Nazareth, this is certainly out of the norm.

The people greet Him with waving palm branches as they sing the Hallel Psalms, and John brings out the words of Psalm 118, specifically. We’ll get to those words in a minute, but what comes to mind when you think of palm branches? We use the small strips, the leaves, if you will, as we process into the church, but typically when we think of palm branches, it brings to mind the whole branch, a large sprawling branch taken straight off the tree. And what those will often bring to mind is royalty. Think about cinematic depictions of a king, especially in the near east, and more often than not there is a servant holding a palm branch and fanning them while they eat grapes, dates, or nuts. It brings to mind the idea of royalty, and would have for the people greeting Jesus in our text as well. There is a reason that they bring those images to our mind, because that is in fact what they were frequently used for during even going back to this time.

In addition, the palms were readily associated with the Hallel Psalms as they are sung during the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, while this feast is during the fall and not going on in the week leading up to the Passover, the palm branches are intricately tied into the use of those Psalms for the people. So closely, in fact, that the palms they fashion to wave and celebrate as they sing are simply referred to as “Hosannas,” reflecting the Hebrew word from Psalm 118. Why is this relevant? The Feast of Tabernacles calls on the people of God to remember the Exodus and God’s deliverance by way of the Passover lamb. And not just to remember it, but to celebrate it. The exodus is all about Jesus. God’s deliverance comes through Jesus, and so it makes sense

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that the people would employ the instruments of celebration from this feast as they welcome the Messiah into His holy city.

So, with this association to royalty, and this connection to the Hallel Psalms, we understand the reason the people used the palms, and why we too carry them into the church as we move with our Lord toward the cross. But what about the words of Psalm 118? John quotes them as saying, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” Now, it’s interesting that they state it in this way. The Psalm itself makes no mention of royalty. The words of Psalm 118:25-27:

Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and He has made His light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!

This spontaneous use of the title of “King” for Jesus is because the people who have gathered understand the Psalm in its Messianic role. Jesus is the festal sacrifice, going forth to be bound and sacrificed on the altar, in this case the cross, for the sins of the world. Whether or not these people have the proper understanding of what the Messiah has come to do is not the important part here, in fact, many of them likely believe as the disciples initially did. They are declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, and this is emphasized in both the immediately preceding verses and the close of the triumphal entry account.

John records in 12:10-11, “So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.” He then records in 12:19, “So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him.’” These are important words from the Apostle, and purposeful inspiration of the Holy Spirit. “Jews were going away” indicates an ongoing movement to Jesus, and this disturbs the leaders greatly. The expression assumes a conversion on the part of the pilgrims to move away from the religion of the authorities, and place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The Pharisees are seeing this in real time, and can do nothing about it. The people have accepted Jesus as their King, and so have welcomed Him in such a kingly manner.

As further evidence of Jesus kingship, John quotes Zechariah 9:9. But we also must look to 1 Kings 1, where the account of Solomon’s anointing takes place. In 1 Kings 1:33-34 records the words of King David:

And the king said to them, “Take with you the servants of your lord and have Solomon my son ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. And let Zadok

the priest and Nathan the prophet there anoint him king over Israel. Then blow the trumpet and say, ‘Long live King Solomon!’”

Jesus rides into Jerusalem and is declared King in the same manner as king Solomon, the son of David. This is not insignificant. Jesus, of the line of David both in the flesh and the Spirit, has fulfilled all the promises of the Messiah. He comes into the city of Jerusalem aboard a donkey, and rides on through the city as He moves toward Calvary, where His blood must be shed for the salvation of mankind.

All of these people who follow Him, having declared Him as their king, need Him to keep moving. But they do not understand just how far He must go. The Pharisees are plotting His death, even as they shout Hosannas far and wide and praise the Son of God. In His threefold office as Prophet, Priest, and King, Jesus knows what must be done. He knows that He must die, and with His death will rule over all things both in heaven and on earth, as it is written in our Epistle lesson this morning, as both God and man. His kingly office is His by divine right, and by the assumption of the human nature, a man, this Godman Jesus Christ, will rule all things from His Father’s throne in heaven.

That is what it means that He is declared King, that He is declared Messiah. It is given to Him as the second person of the Trinity, to rule all things for the salvation of mankind. He has been present throughout the salvation history, ruling from His salvific throne from the very beginning. Now, in His humanity, He will rule all things in heaven and on earth for the benefit of those whom He loves—for you. Everything He will do as He rides into Jerusalem, He does for you. So many in the world are wandering, lost in the darkness of sin with no hope of salvation. Jesus came to die for them, too, and we pray always that those people would come to the knowledge of the truth and believe.

But you have that hope of salvation. It is yours by virtue of Jesus’ death, the death which He now goes forth to willingly accept on your behalf. His movement toward the cross is purposeful, and never coincidental. Jesus being welcomed as a King is meant for hope and comfort for the believer. Despite the events that will soon transpire, Jesus is in full control over all of it. He is the ruler of the κόσμος, the whole universe. And He rules all of history for the benefit of your salvation. No one can take that away from you, because the King of all things has declared it to be yours. By His blood, and by the breath of His Word, He declares you to be righteous and justified. You are His own and no one can snatch you out of His hand.

And even to this day, we declare as the people in Jerusalem did that Jesus is King. He has redeemed us, lost and condemned sinners though we were, because He loves us. And in response to that great love, we offer Him our thanks and praise. We come

together here and receive His great gifts which He freely gives to us, and then we respond in the words which He has taught us to use. Not some made up song with words that have almost no meaning, but an ancient song—one of God’s making by His Word. And so we sang in the closing verse of our hymn a moment ago:

"Hosanna in the highest!"

That ancient song we sing,
For Christ is our Redeemer,
The Lord of heaven our King.
Oh, may we ever praise Him
With heart and life and voice
And in His blissful presence
Eternally rejoice.

Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem being praised as a King, and yet His entrance is taking Him to a throne of pain, suffering, and death. There on the cross of Calvary, He will exercise His authority to die, though He has not sinned to be subject to that death. By His death He will destroy death. By becoming obedient to the point of death, He has satisfied the righteous requirements of our just and vengeful God. We confess, as Paul exhorts the Philippians, that Jesus Christ is Lord. And we confess as the people in Jerusalem, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” For He comes to us here this day, bearing the same gift of forgiveness which He brought with Him on that donkey. Here, in the very body and blood of Christ which we will now receive, Jesus imparts forgiveness, life, and salvation. So, like the people in Jerusalem, we give our Lord and Savior a Kingly welcome, declaring Him to be the ruler of the universe, and God of very God. By way of His sacrifice on the cross, and for His sake, we are made partakers of that kingship. For as those who have been baptized into the death of Christ, we have been made one in His body, and as one body in faith, we will sing the praises of our King in the blissful presence of our Maker and Redeemer for all eternity. Amen.