

## ***What kind of king is this?***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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The Lent journey leads us to this week, dubbed Palm and Passion Sunday. I don't know about you, but I struggle with this particular worship each year: holding those two themes – Palm waving excitement, and the mix of guilt and shame and grief of Passion. What really happened: people welcomed him with cheers, then, within a few days, the *mob mentality* kicked in.

First of all, it might be helpful to look more closely at the celebration of Palms as told by the Gospel storytellers. There is no scholarly consensus on how large the crowd is, or who lined the entryway into Jerusalem for Jesus. Mark's account implies a larger crowd, and many of those people onlookers, not just disciples. Luke's celebration is more modest, perhaps more orchestrated, with primarily the disciples gathering. I always wanted to imagine masses of adoring fans; I think because I have grown up in a culture that worships celebrity – adoring fans, but, the fans don't know the *real* person, often only a persona.

I wonder about those people who greeted Jesus with palms: who were they, what compelled them to be there. There were the disciples, the dedicated circle of followers. Except that during Holy Week we hear that even they let Jesus down, they fall asleep when he asks them to stay alert, Peter denies knowing Jesus when asked. We are a fickle bunch at the best of times – we humans.

I'm on a diet suggested by my dear wife. At night, when I'm enjoying the quiet, I waffle, I equivocate. I do the calculating – *how much can I enjoy without completely blowing my calorie budget for the day?*

I'm wondering from today's Gospel reading, then: what were the people, having heard stories and myths about Jesus, expecting of Jesus? Did they like what they saw?

What exactly Jesus was riding as he entered Jerusalem? The Gospels don't agree on this – John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg suggest that this parade was a political satire of the Roman Empire. Imagine the Mighty Roman Empire, very possibly entering from the west gate to Jerusalem at that very same time as Jesus rides in through the east gate on an unimpressive donkey.<sup>1</sup>

As we watch a military superpower reducing its neighbour to rubble – the death and destruction, all because of a tyrant. Uncanny, to see that contrast of powers – Ukraine and Russia. Egotism at its worst. We want to take the moral high ground.

We stand with Ukraine. We would never do that! But, consider for a moment that our neighbours to the south voted in a President not long ago who *loved* to show off his power. Did people like him? How does the saying go:

*Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know,*

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<sup>1</sup> The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem. Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan. © 2009 Harper Collins

People endured Rome and its power, because they feared it. This Jesus, they had heard the stories, the myths. He was witty and courageous and wise, he performed miracles and said that God had sent him. The Emperor claimed to be like God too, and the Romans brandished swords to enforce compliance.

That picture, that parody of the imperial bravado, Jesus on a donkey, no swords or convoys of soldiers on chargers. Jesus invited people to get behind a different king, and kingdom. Not a kingdom enforced by fear and violent force, but a kingdom where everyone has a place, everyone is loved, everyone has a seat at the banquet table.

To be honest, this is a perplexing vision Jesus presents by the standard of a self-absorbed, power-hungry culture:

- No one gets royal treatment – in fact, the king comes to the party riding a donkey;
- The leader, a strange sort of king, washes the feet of the servant.<sup>2</sup>

I intentionally use the word kin-dom, rather than king-dom, in prayers and, particularly, in the prayer Jesus taught. I do that to remind myself, us, that God's vision through the eyes of Jesus and the stories of the Gospels, is a profound contrast to king-doms that humans create. Even this country we call Canada, established by my European ancestors, settlers, disregarded the people who already lived on this land. A system of control was established, human ego, and need for power over rather than power shared prevailed, and still does to some extent today. This is our raw humanity revealed - the systems we humans create, in utter and absolute contrast to the kin-dom vision Jesus saw.

I want that. I think WE yearn for that vision of sharing, love. But what of the devil we know far too well. We and those curious onlookers waving cloaks and palms as Jesus entered Jerusalem, they knew that Rome was nearby. The religious establishment were already strategizing, planting fear in the minds of the masses – is *that* the king you want leading you?

Is that the king WE desire? Of course he is. But the humanly contrived kingdoms of our world, are not just flexing their muscles in Ukraine, Syria, Myanmar. Systems of control are all around us, and in us. This week, Holy Week, the remembering of the Last Supper, Jesus in Gethsemane, Good Friday crucifixion. They are an invitation to prayerfully reflect on those systems in and around us that insulate us from the suffering of others. All those habits, lifestyle choices, those preconceived ideas that we fall back on in order not to lose our privilege and power.

We want peace, and justice, and sharing and reconciliation. But to follow a king grounded in love rather than violent control, will require that we stop supporting (investing in) and benefitting from systems that cause suffering. Which king will we follow, not just in words but in actions?

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<sup>2</sup> John 13: 1- -17. Go to, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2013%3A1-17&version=NIV>