

What Kind of King?

Mark 11:1-10

Years ago, I went with a couple of Chinese students to the 4th of July parade here in Ames. When we talked about it afterwards, they said they were amazed by several things. First, they were surprised at the variety of groups who joined in the parade. They were especially surprised that a Falun Gong group was able to march in the parade – in their experience, no persecuted group like that would have been allowed to be in any sort of official parade. Second, though, they were surprised there weren't any tanks or other military vehicles. In China, parades were often military exercises, designed to show off the military might, and to scare off anyone who would think about resisting.

We see that in other countries, too. Virtually every picture of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un show him before a military parade. President Putin makes a big deal of every Victory Day parade in Red Square. Dictators use military parades as a chance to show off their military equipment and frighten those who might try to go against them. The parades show what kind of leaders they are.

Here in the US, military parades haven't been used that way. According to presidential historian Michael Beschloss, when President Eisenhower was asked about the possibility of such a parade, he responded, "absolutely not, we are the pre-eminent power on Earth. For us to try to imitate what the Soviets are doing in Red Square would make us look weak."

The parades that are the context for today's lessons were often designed to show off their power and make sure everyone knew what kind of king this was. Most often, kings or conquering generals led their troops through a

city to show victory. When a conquering general returned to Rome, he rode in a four-horse chariot of gold through the streets of Rome in unarmed procession with his army, captives, and the spoils of his war. Officers in polished armor displayed the banners of the defeated armies. At Jupiter's temple, he would offer sacrifice and the tokens of his victory to the god. Although he was supposed to display humility, he would often be worshipped almost as a god himself.

As Jesus makes his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, we see that idea inverted. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, the religious leaders and Roman soldiers are watching from afar, not marching in the parade. The peasants who would have been marched behind a conquering hero as captives were instead those who were cheering at the possibility of being saved. The lame, the blind, the children, the peasants from Galilee cheering one of their own, those from Bethany cheering for the one who they'd seen do the impossible. Their cheers showed the kind of king Jesus was.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of humility. He came in peace, though he could have turned the cheering crowd into an army or called down an angelic army himself. He came to be king, but not the kind of king the people expected. He came to save them, but not in the way they were expecting.

Jesus never really acted like the kind of king people expected. Jesus is not born where a king is expected to be born. He is born in a manger, not a palace. He is born in a little town, Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. After he was born, the wise men came following the star they hoped would lead them to the newborn king.

They brought gifts fit for a king, and must have been surprised when they came upon Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus in their humble wetting. When the wise men asked King Herod where to find this new king, Herod only saw a potential threat to his power, and killed the children of Bethlehem to try to end that threat.

After Jesus fed the 5000, the crowd was going to attempt to make him king by force, so he withdrew to a solitary place. He knew they only wanted him to make him king so he would feed them again, but he knew he wasn't a bread king.

Throughout his life, Jesus was sometimes seen as a king, but never because he was wearing a crown or fancy robes. Aside from this Triumphal Entry, the only people who recognize Jesus as a king are the people who are threatened by his kingship. The language Jesus uses about his kingdom, about faith, about lord all threatened the way that Herod, Pilate, Caesar and others used and held power. And so, Jesus is crowned as a king and declared the King of the Jews, but only on the cross. It is there that Jesus is shown to truly be our king.

Tradition tells us that during the victory parade for a conquering Roman general, a slave would whisper in the general's ear, "Remember, you are mortal," to remind them that even if they were on top of the world at this point, they would not remain there forever. Jesus didn't need such a reminder. He knew what was coming. He knew his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, even as ridiculous as it might seem to a Roman soldier who had seen triumphal entries done right, would set things into motion that couldn't be stopped. He knew his presence and manner of entrance threatened the established order, and those in charge of maintaining that order would stop at nothing to keep it that way. He knew he was mortal, and

when he was crowned as king, it would be with a crown of thorns. When he was recognized as king, it would be because of the sign above him on the cross. Yet he came, because he was righteous and could save us. His death was for us all.

That is the kind of king Jesus is. Not the kind of king who enjoys power for its own sake. Not the kind of king who follows the Mel Brooks line, "It's good to be the king!" Not the kind of king who will scheme and kill to maintain power. Jesus is the kind of king who cares for his subjects. Jesus is the kind of king who gives up his life for his subjects. Jesus is the kind of king we need.

We continue to wait for the day when Jesus comes not on a donkey, but on a white horse, to declare victory once and for all over sin, death, and the devil. We wait for the king to come when glory dawns. We wait for the king to come and make everything right.

Until then, we need to remember that we are mortal. We can do God's work in the world, but we cannot bring peace by ourselves. We cannot fix the world by ourselves. We, too, need a Savior.

Someday Christ will come again and be revealed as the King of kings and Lord of lords. But today is still Palm Sunday—not Easter. We are at the start of Holy Week and not yet at the Last Day. Today Jesus is still the king who comes in mercy and grace. He is humble and lowly, having salvation. So rejoice and be glad! Your King comes to save you from your sins and save you from yourself. What a wonderful reason for a parade!

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa Palm Sunday March 28, 2021