

Palm Sunday – The man who is mocked as king – is King

“Jesus? A King? You’re having a laugh aren’t you?” The Roman Soldiers certainly were. They decided to dress this young Galilean up to look like a grotesque king.

You see, don’t slip into thinking the crucifixion was some sort of sanitised, serene event, with Jesus just hanging, almost floating next to the cross. This was brutal and unrelenting torture.

It was traditional to flog prisoners to within an inch of their lives, but what the soldiers did next to Jesus was not part of the job description. Think of the smuggled out videos we see on the news of prisoners, helpless before their captors being humiliated, terrified, tortured and subjected to behaviour which reduces the abusers to the status of animals. That’s what happens to Jesus.

There is no need for what happens next, but the sadistic humour of the Roman soldiers flows out against Jesus in a cruel irony because the man whom they mock as king, actually is the King!

But, with his eyes focused on the cross ahead, Jesus has submitted to their control and so they take him, bloodied and torn and they stand him in their midst, strip his clothes off and place a purple robe over his naked body – “Look! He is a king now.”

“Hang on, he need’s crown – this’ll do.”

What a “laugh” a crown made out of vine thorns; thin branches with huge spikes up to 20cm long, a perfect “crown” for a condemned man, oh, he looks like a king now.

Something’s missing though – a sceptre, “give him that stick.”

And so the soldiers bow down and mockingly worship the pathetic looking king they have just crowned; “Hail king of the Jews!”

“Very good, but if I could just borrow that from you, your majesty...” and they take the “sceptre” and begin to beat their king and punch him with their battle hardened fists and spit on him.

So it goes on; worship and mocking and beating until even the soldiers get bored of their game and take everything off this person who is no longer treated as human and give Jesus his own clothes back and lead him out to be crucified.

The thing is many a true word is spoken in jest, even in sickeningly brutal jest.

Let’s first of all go back to our reading today from Matthew 21.

How we arrive says a lot about us. If you arrive somewhere with a caravan hitched to the back of your car it pretty much marks you out as a caravanner. You would be pretty surprised if you asked someone with a caravan hitched to their car which site they were staying on and they replied that they weren’t, they simply enjoyed the pleasure towing; the frustration of other drivers and their reckless overtaking manoeuvres to get past you not to mention the increased fuel consumption towing brings!

If you arrive with a caravan, you are clearly staying in a caravan.

So it is that Jesus is making a point in the way in which he arrives in Jerusalem.

“As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.”

Why is Jesus going to enter Jerusalem like that? Well, Matthew tells us, it is to fulfil the words of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9)

It makes a statement, it marks Jesus out as someone special, someone about to do something; Jesus is saying, “Look – here is your King!” and Matthew keeps on driving the point home because as Jesus rides into Jerusalem he tells us that the crowds ahead of him and those who follow him are shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!”

What they are saying is literally; “Save us Son of David!” But why do they say that? Wasn’t the man who brought Jesus up as his son Joseph?

Well, why are we celebrating William’s Wedding to Kate in a couple of weeks? Because William is the son of Charles, the son of Elizabeth – the Queen. William therefore is an heir to the throne and the Son of David is the heir of the great King of Israel; the man after God’s own heart. The Son of David is a title applied to the heir to David’s throne and therefore the messiah, the chosen one of God – the King.

But hearing that Jesus is the King is nothing new for us. Go back to the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, how does it begin?

“A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David”  
King Jesus the son of David, the Christ which is the Greek form of the Hebrew “Messiah” which means “anointed one” – another way of saying (you’ve guessed it) “king”.

In fact, the whole Palm Sunday passage as Jesus enters into Jerusalem resounds with Matthew’s assertion that Jesus is indeed the true King of the Jews. At the beginning of his Gospel Matthew tells us that the city was disturbed when the Magi arrived asking “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matt 2:2-3), now in chapter 21 the whole city is stirred to ask “who is this?”

We know that it is the King the Magi came seeking, but at the time, the people in Jerusalem don’t quite follow up what they have almost said, they stop just short of openly declaring Jesus to be their king. Instead, the answer to the question “Who is this” is “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

But as we approach the Cross Matthew won’t let us get away with that. We have already seen the irony of the soldiers’ behaviour but then our Gospel writer gives us two more pieces of evidence.

Above Jesus is hung the “titulus”, the charge against him. What was the charge? “This is Jesus the king of the Jews”.

Although John tells us that the chief priests were offended Matthew and Mark record that the lower ranks of religious leaders mocked Jesus as a failed king (Matt 27: 41-43); “He saved others, they said, but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”

But despite the objections and the mockery Pilate held fast to his accusation that Jesus claimed to be a King, after all Pilate had asked Jesus to his face; “Are you the king of the Jews” and Jesus’ answer had been simple and succinct, “Yes, it is as you say.” (Matt 27:11)

So, what sort of king is Jesus? Certainly not a king like Pilate, nothing like a Roman Emperor, there was a cruel irony in the charge Pilate hung above Jesus’ tortured body on the cross.

We may well talk of a triumphal entry, but in reality it is young man on a donkey – on a colt, a young donkey! No one is waving swords, just palm branches. The streets aren’t littered with the bodies of soldiers, just coats to cushion the animal’s hoofs.

And then, here is this king, bloodied and beaten, mocked and humiliated, hung on a cross to die a shameful and agonising death. No, no, no. We know what kings are like, we will see plenty of them a week on Friday at the Royal wedding and this dying man looked nothing like they will.

But Jesus is a different sort of King, he is the High King of Heaven. He is not the king of the Jews alone, but the king over everyone and everything. Read Matthew’s Gospel and again and again you will hear Jesus keep on telling people about not the kingdom of Israel, nor Rome, but the Kingdom of Heaven.

And King Jesus is not a despot or a tyrant, a little cruel man in it for the money, the power and the self-glorification. Remember when the mother of James and John asks Jesus for the two top jobs for her sons in Jesus’ kingdom? How that sparks indignation and jealousy from the rest of the disciples?

What is Jesus’ response? He calls them all together and explains;

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt 20:25-28)

Jesus is the Servant King, the master who washes his disciples' filthy feet, the exalted guest who eats with sinners, the holy one who touches the unclean, the Lord of life who willingly submits to death out of love for his people. Kings of this world often exercise their power to gain all they can from the people they are supposed to serve, but Jesus is different.

Recently when anything vaguely controversial involving the church happened I noticed that on the internet comment boards there would eventually be someone who would post a message along the lines of, “They're all a load of hypocrites. The Church of England was only created by Henry VIII so that he could divorce his wife.”

Now, I spent a few weeks thinking, “My, we have some historically astute contributors to the website message boards these days!” until it finally clicked – “Ahh, you've been watching The Tudors on TV!”

Well, maybe some of those around Henry were more genuine in their reasons for wanting to establish the Protestant Church in England, but kings like Henry VIII were often only interested in their own power and their own self advancement.

But not Jesus.

Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth, he is the Word, the creator of all things, he is one of three members of the Holy Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but even so Jesus is not obliged to love us, to serve us and certainly not to endure our mockery and abuse and yet he does.

He may not look it to the soldiers or religious rulers or gawping ghoulish crowd, but the man who is mocked as king, is King; he is the King of kings and the Lord of lords and his kingdom is everlasting. He is the servant King, the saving King and the reigning King and through faith in his sacrifice on the cross for us we can amazingly have free access into his Kingdom.

How right the crowds were that first Palm Sunday to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem shouting to the coming righteous King; "Save us" as they watched the Son of David ride into their city.

But as we start Holy week, is that how we welcome Jesus? Have we acknowledged him as the King that he is? I dare say that you will be able to lock yourself away for the next fortnight and miss the Royal Wedding if it's not your cup of tea. I suspect that there are many people who pay little or no attention to the Queen, she is merely a face on their stamp or on the money in their pocket.

But as we approach Easter, perhaps we need to ask ourselves; is that the limit of the respect and the awe that we show to Jesus? The righteous King of Heaven, the one who heads resolutely to the cross for us, the cruel throne of the King of love.

Amen.