

Matthew 21:1-11 Advent 1

A Different Kind of King

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 21: "Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden." This is the Word of the Lord.

Behold, Your King Is Coming Your King is coming to you. That's the theme of Advent. It was also the theme of the last couple of Sundays of the church year, too, when we heard from Scripture that Jesus will return in glory. But as Advent starts and we turn our eyes to Christmas, the message changes a bit.

"Behold, your King is coming to you." Kings don't come to you. No offense intended, but nobody around here has such political gravitas that any king or ruler of a nation in this world is going to come to you. Kings are important, busy people. If you and a king need to get together, he doesn't come to you: you go to the king. But that's not the case here.

"Behold, your King is coming to you." "Behold, your King is coming to you, humble." Kings don't come humbly. They come regally, with an expectation of respect, a choice menu and plush accommodations. If, for some reason, a king would come to you, it wouldn't be a relaxing time. You'd need to be on your toes at all times, to cater to his every whim. Ah, it's good to be king.

"Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden." A donkey is not the preferred method of royal transport. Kings prefer the speed and power of horses, not the semi-reliable plod of a pack animal: they're royalty, not baggage, after all— they definitely don't consider themselves a burden for any beast or any one. A donkey just doesn't do.

And yet, this is what the prophet Zechariah declared (Zechariah 9:9): "Say to the daughter of Zion, „Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" Again, unless you're in very special company, kings don't come to you—especially not humbly and riding donkeys. They might come at you, boldly charging on a warhorse with a sword to do you in on the field of battle. But they don't come to you humbly.

Clearly, the prophet is speaking of a different kind of king.

Behold the King coming to the daughter of Zion in the Gospel lesson for today. He doesn't come with a powerful army, but a rather ragtag assortment of unarmed disciples. He doesn't come on a proud warhorse, but on a donkey. It's not even His own: He has to borrow it for the day because He has need of it.

Apart from faith, it's hard to take this King seriously. No troops, no entourage of courtiers, no royal robes or crown. Those looking on might come to perhaps a couple of different conclusions. One is that this so-called "King" is seriously delusional—that He imagines His greatness, that in His mind He's riding a horse, surrounded by His court and soldiers. The

fact that He hasn't denied being the Son of God doesn't hurt this argument in the least. The other conclusion is that He's running one of the most presumptuous cons ever—that if He just presents Himself as a king with enough charisma, He'll convince a few people to follow Him. The best con artists can exert that sort of hypnotic influence on people. There's no arguing that people are convinced: even when He rides in on a donkey without the trappings of royalty, people do more than stop and pay heed. They spread their cloaks on the ground so that the donkey's hooves don't have to touch the dirt and muck of the road. They cut down and spread a carpet of palm branches too. And they shout out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Are they under some sort of spell—do they think they see something that isn't there? No, when others ask, "Who is this?", the crowds answer, perfectly sensibly, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."

He's not a madman or a conman. He's a different kind of king. The confession of faith made by the crowd tells you exactly who He is. You know the words well, but take a closer look. He is King. He just hasn't come to flex His muscle, to subdue nations by the sword and shed blood of other peoples, like His ancestor King David. The Son of David has come to open the gates of the kingdom of heaven, to defeat the enemies of sin, death and hell. Though humble, He comes in the name of the Lord: in other words, what He says and does bears the authority of God Most High because He is God Most High in human flesh. He comes not to kill, but to save: when the people shout out, "Hosanna!"—"Save now!," they are declaring what He has come to do. He is entering the gates of Jerusalem to save, and He will accomplish that salvation, that victory, within the week.

He is also a prophet. He is "the Prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee." Prophets are those who speak the Word of God, and Jesus speaks the Word of God. But prophecy is not just a sideline, a hobby of this King. He rules by His Word. His Word is how He exercises His power. This King has recently gone to the tomb of Lazarus. He's said, "Lazarus, come forth!," and the greatest enemy—death—has had to bow the knee. Demons flee at His command; and when Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven," sin loses its death grip, too. This Prophet speaks God's powerful Word because this Prophet is God Himself—and this Prophet is the Word of God made flesh, dwelling among His people. So He is the King and He is the Prophet; and as your mind goes back to confirmation class, you're thinking we're at 2 out of 3, for Jesus holds the threefold office of Prophet, Priest and King.

You're right, and His office of Priest is in those words, too. Remember "Hosanna!," that He has come to save now. Remember that priests offer sacrifices. To save—to open His kingdom for His people, this KingPriest is going to make the sacrifice for sin. He's going to be the Sacrifice for sin. He's going to the cross to die for the sins of the world. He is, indeed, a different kind of King. This King's kingdom is eternal: and He opens it up to you and to me not by shedding the blood of others, but by allowing His own blood to be shed. This King wins life for all by His own death. This King is a Prophet, who rules by His Word; and by His Word, He opens the kingdom of heaven to you. He does not describe a long checklist of goals you must obtain to be worthy of His kingdom.

Instead, He declares you forgiven and silences your enemies. He sends your sin fleeing away. He tells Satan once again that you belong to Him, that the devil has no claim on you. He rests His foot on the neck of death and says, "This one belongs to Me, not you, and you may

only act only with My permission to deliver My people from that sinful world to My eternal kingdom.”

This King is the Priest who has made the Sacrifice for your sins and the sins of the world, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. By submitting to the death that you deserve, He is risen again to give you life. He does all this in the name of the Lord, fully with His Father’s approval. He is a different kind of King. Furthermore, He is not far away. Although He sits at His Father’s right hand, He also promises that He is as near to you as His means of grace.

There’s a reason why we echo the crowds in our Gospel lesson every time we receive the Supper: we sing “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” because behold! Your King comes to you, humble; not on a donkey, but in, with and under bread and wine—just as He is present in His Word and Baptism, too. Behold, your King comes to you.

Looking Outward, Looking Inward You’re probably familiar with The Chronicles of Narnia, the allegorical series by C.S. Lewis. Throughout those books, Christ is portrayed as Aslan, the lion; and from time to time, C.S. Lewis reminds us that Aslan is not a tame lion. He simply doesn’t display His teeth and claws all that often. That is Christ on Palm Sunday, as well as in His means of grace: He deals with you in mercy, not by force. If you’ve been around the Church for a while, Palm Sunday is old hat: you might hear of it twice a year, on the first Sunday of Advent and the start of Holy Week. Jesus’ triumphal, yet humble, entry is something you’re used to.

However, you see Christ as He is by faith. And looking outward from the Church, the world is full of people who do not see Him so. If they are convicted of their sin, they see only a hostile king who comes at war, a roaring lion with claws out and teeth bared. For those who are troubled by their sin and know there’s no way to make up for it, the coming of Jesus is not a welcome thing. If Jesus comes to save now, they see themselves as outside the crowd of His beloved people: that leaves them either despairing or angry at the name of Jesus.

And the world is full of people who consider Jesus to be, at best, a tamed and toothless lion. Either they dismiss Him as a madman or a conman, or else they believe that the Son of God has decided to change His mind and approve of sin because He’s not striking down sinners right and left. Neither group sees Him as He is. One sees Jesus only according to the Law and believes that Jesus is out to get them. The other sees Jesus only according to the Gospel and believes that Jesus is a big happy grandpa who doesn’t care what you do, perhaps with a white beard and a red suit. Neither group has any use for Christ in the upcoming Christmas season. Make it about reindeer or snowmen or lite beer if you want, but don’t sing about the Son of God born to Mary in Bethlehem.

The best, most merciful thing that the Church can do in this world is to proclaim Christ as He is. He is still the holy King who doesn’t tolerate sin and judges sinners; and He is still the King who has suffered our judgment in order to conquer sin and give life to all who believe. Such a King can only be known by faith—but that proclamation gives faith along with forgiveness. If we fail to proclaim all of Christ, we leave people either despairing of sin or smug that God doesn’t care.

Either way, they are lost; and that is not the will of our King. He comes to save, to bless and forgive. So we proclaim the Christ as He is. It is the same looking inward, too. Part of you wants the toothless lion. Your sinful flesh coaxes you to believe that Jesus is a benevolent king who overlooks your favorite sins, who buys into your masks of hypocrisy, who simply lets you transgress your way through life and still rescues in the end. With persuasion like that, you're tempted to a lot of easy, enjoyable or expedient sins.

But each of those sins is at work to persuade you that you want a different Jesus than the One who goes to the cross and dies for your sins. Each one of them offends the Lord, who takes your deliverance so seriously that He went to the cross and suffered your judgment so that you might be delivered. Your sinful flesh doesn't rest. It's always in a hurry because it knows its days are numbered. Always be on guard against those temptations to spit in the face of a lion. Part of you wants the claws out and the teeth bared—not at you, but at the afflictions that you face. You may want the King to execute judgment against your enemies right away, against people who have done you harm.

You may demand that He speak His victorious Word and chase disease and affliction away; there are times when I would dearly love to say for the sake of God's people, "Sickness, be gone!" or "Pain, be gone!" and to watch the Lord act according to my immediate will. And that betrays the sin, does it not? So often, we would rather have the Lord act according to our will rather than pray, "Thy will be done." We want a lion that bares tooth and claw on our command.

But He's a different kind of King. He works chiefly in humility, by mercy and service. His power is shown mostly to you in the powerful forgiveness He bestows. As He has delivered you from the slavery of sin, so He seeks to deliver those who have hurt you from that same slavery, too. He permits those different afflictions according to His wisdom for your good. So afflicted, you might not look like a child of the King—but then,

He didn't look much like the King when He died to deliver you from affliction. And in the meantime, He still comes to you humbly in His means of grace. He speaks gives you forgiveness in the name of the Lord; and make no mistake: the forgiveness He bestows there is powerful grace, for it truly delivers you from sin and death and devil. He is neither tame and toothless nor indiscriminate in His prey; but the King comes to give you salvation. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, for you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen