

Jesus Is King

During these weeks of Lent, we have been following the footsteps of Jesus, remembering how—2000 years ago—he walked the beside the Sea of Galilee, calling the fishermen to be disciples, teaching of God’s Kingdom, bringing the message of salvation from sin, healing the sick, blessing the kids, feeding the crowds, walking on water... And we’ve been focusing on how Jesus still walks beside people today... how he walks beside each one of us in our daily lives.

However today, our focus shifts. Instead of thinking about how Jesus walks beside us, let’s ponder the question: “Do we walk beside him?” “You & I... do we walk beside Jesus?”

That’s what happened on the first Palm Sunday—the crowds accompanied Jesus into the Holy City of Jerusalem. It was a bright Spring day, just 4 days before Passover was to begin. Passover—the biggest celebration of the entire year, when everyone in the whole country—and even those living abroad—everyone who could travel came to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. They came to commemorate God’s deliverance of the His people from slavery in Egypt 1200 years earlier... how in the 10th plague, the angel of death struck the firstborn son of the Pharaoh and all the households of Egypt, but passed over the Hebrew people, who had sacrificed a lamb to God, and had marked their doorposts with the blood of the Passover lamb. Then, God had led the people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, as they fled from Egypt. God had parted the Red Sea so they could escape from Pharaoh’s armies, and then had caused the waters to return, destroying the chariots and soldiers who pursued them. The Passover celebrated God’s salvation for His people.

And now, just 4 days before the Passover, Jesus made what must have seemed a strange request. He asked two of his disciples to go and borrow a donkey for him to ride on. In all the Bible, there is no other mention of Jesus riding a donkey. He walked everywhere. He had just walked the 90 miles from Galilee to Jerusalem. So why did he need a donkey now to ride less than a mile into the city of Jerusalem?

It was powerful proclamation that Jesus was the King whom God had promised long ago, through the writings of the prophets. Jesus was the Messiah, the descendant of King David, the greatest King of Israel's history. Jesus was the King whom God had sent to deliver the people from their enemies, and to begin God's everlasting kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace.

Just as his ancestor, King David, had ridden a donkey into the city of Jerusalem—(a humble animal—a donkey, not a mighty war horse)—so the prophesy was that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem in the same way. From childhood, every Jewish person knew by heart the words of the prophet Zechariah (9:9):

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!”
Lo, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is he,
Humble and riding on a donkey.

So, Jesus entered the Royal City of Jerusalem, King David's capital, riding a donkey in fulfillment of the prophesy.

Everyone realized that he was promised Messiah, the King they had been waiting for. They believed that he would call down the armies of heaven, and defeat the ungodly Romans in a mighty battle, and establish God's kingdom on earth.

So, they welcomed him by waving palm branches—in the ancient world, a sign of victory & celebration. And they sang aloud the words of Psalm 118: 25-26:

“Hosanna! Save us, we beseech thee, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech thee, give us success!
Blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord!

Today, on Palm Sunday, in the year 2016, Jesus is once more proclaimed the Messiah, the King. And he turns to each of us and says, “Will you walk alongside of me?” “Will you shout ‘Hosanna! Save now!’” “Will you welcome me as your King?”

When we walk beside Jesus on Palm Sunday, we walk the paths of celebration. The paths of celebration. That’s a wonderful thing! We recognize that Jesus is the King, God’s own Son, come from heaven to save us, and to establish God’s Kingdom on earth. We realize that Jesus has come in fulfillment of the promises of God, proclaimed by the prophets of old. Our hearts are filled with joy!

However, it’s not as simple as it first seems. We tend to get so caught up in our everyday concerns, in the problems of our lives, that some days it takes effort to celebrate Jesus as King. More than that, we all go through times when our lives are marked by tragedy. How do we celebrate then?

I think it helps to keep our eyes on Jesus... to focus on the man who rides the humble donkey on Palm Sunday. It helps to center our lives on the depth of his love for us, the depth of his understanding, his compassion and peace. We look at the events of our lives, and see his presence in times of blessing and in times of suffering. Sometimes our “Hallelujahs” and “Hosannas” come from the depths of our joy, with bright enthusiasm, sometimes we whisper our “Hallelujahs” with a yearning hope, sometimes all we can do is reach our hand toward

Jesus, and do our best to trust him as our King. Whichever is our current circumstance, Jesus welcomes us there, walking beside him, on Palm Sunday paths of celebration.

“Will you walk beside me?” Jesus asks.

Paths of celebration are part of Holy Week, but there are 3 other characteristics of the path as well. And for each one, Jesus invites us, “Will you walk beside me?”

The next path we encounter with Jesus is the path of sorrow. The path of sorrow. On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus approaches the city of Jerusalem, with the crowds all around him celebrating, shouting, praising God. And then, Jesus begins to weep. The tears flow freely as he cries for the people of Jerusalem. He voices his anguish with these words: “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.”

Will you walk beside Jesus on the paths of sorrow? There is so much that is broken in our world. Children who are hungry, who do not have the basic necessities of life. Elderly folk who struggle day by day. People of all ages who deal with sickness, and addiction. Those whose world is filled with violence. Those who are living with hopelessness & despair. Our neighbors who are searching for God. People who feel unloved and unlovable.

Are we willing to open our eyes to the pain around us? To shed tears for the people in our community and all over the face of the earth? To pray for a world that needs to know the things that make for peace—deep and lasting peace in our hearts, as well as between people and between nations?

The path of celebration, the path of sorrow... Jesus also asks us to walk beside him on the path of sacrifice... 5 days after Palm Sunday, Jesus again walked the streets of Jerusalem, this

time, carrying his cross to the hill called Calvary, where he was crucified for our sins, so that we might be forgiven, redeemed, set free.

Weeks before, he had said to his friends, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) How can we do this? How can we take up our cross daily and follow Jesus? Are there ways we can give sacrificially, of our time, of our financial support, of our skills & spiritual gifts? At the high school youth retreat yesterday, the kids discussed a report from the 20/20 news program that included “giving back” as one of the key components of happiness. Jesus invites us to walk the path of sacrifice, sacrificially giving back in places of need.

There is one more aspect of the path of Jesus. It is a path of celebration, of sorrow, of sacrifice, and also, of servanthood. Servanthood. On the night of the Passover feast, before He shared in the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus knelt and washed their feet. In the Gospel of John 13: 13-16a, we read Jesus’ explanation for this caring act toward his weary, frightened disciples:

¹³You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.

Jesus invites us to share his path of servanthood, caring for those we know who are hurting. This afternoon & this evening, our community choir will present the annual Palm Sunday cantata. It contains an achingly beautiful solo which expresses Jesus’ path of servanthood:

Who Is This King? By Joseph M. Martin

Who is this King that lays aside His crown?
Who is this King that gently kneels down?
Who is this King that comes to the meek,
 strengthens the weak?
Who is this King?

Who is this King, this servant of man?
Who is this King with carpenter's hands?
Who is this King that holds the unclean,
 dies to redeem?
Who is this King?

From heaven's bright throne and courts filled with praise
King Jesus came humbly, a servant of grace.
Trading His glory for shadows and fears,
He washes the feet of the world with his tears.

And so Palm Sunday leaves us with a question... Jesus' question to each one of us, "Will you walk beside me?" "Will you walk alongside me in paths of celebration, paths of sorrow, paths of sacrifice, paths of servanthood?" "Will you walk beside me?" Amen.