

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21:1-17

Palm/Passion Sunday
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 25, 2018

Characteristics of the Kingdom

Introduction to the Psalm

Our reading from Psalm 118 describes a victor's triumphal entry into the city or temple and thus parallels Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Listen to these words from Psalm 118:1-2, and 19-29...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

All four Gospel writers record the royal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—what we have come to know as Palm Sunday. With different accents, and variety in selection of detail, the evangelists combine to tell the same wondrous story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and our Lord's Passion. Listen to Matthew's account in chapter 21, verses 1-17...

Sermon

It was the beginning of the end for Jesus. Now entering what we have come to know as Holy Week, there was one week left in his earthly life. The scriptures recognize the importance of this week in the story they have to tell and thus more space is devoted to the Passion Narrative, especially in Mark and John, than to any other event in the life and ministry of Jesus.

And what the scriptures reveal is that Jesus conveyed in this royal entry that he was the Messiah, God's anointed King. He was obviously the fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (9:9)

There was no trumpeter, no herald, no proclamation, no royal pomp—nothing but a man riding into the city on a donkey. But the people knew that prophecy in Zechariah. And Jesus, it was true, had become the object of much interest because of his teaching and his miracles. So most of the crowd responded by spreading their garments before him and cutting palm branches to spread in his path. The people who went before him, and who followed, shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mt. 21:9)

And although people would understand the claim Jesus was making, many would not understand the kind of King Jesus was claiming to be. Many then and today miss important truths conveyed this Palm Sunday concerning the Kingdom of Christ.

For example, what is suggested first of all as a truth or characteristic of Christ’s Kingdom is *the kingliness of lowliness*. Did he not teach his disciples that he had come, not to be served but to serve? Had he not been born in a borrowed stable? Would he not die on a cross between two thieves? Did he not say,

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Mt. 11:28-29)

And through this kingliness of lowliness, in our weakness we are able to find his strength being made perfect. In being lifted up onto the cross Jesus draws all people unto himself. The kingliness of lowliness.

Second, in this Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem, no less than lowliness is *peace* suggested as characteristic of Christ’s kingdom. This is first evident in the animal on which Jesus rides. While the horse hinted of war, the donkey was the symbol of peace. And immediately following the words quoted in Zechariah was this promise:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
 and the war-horse from Jerusalem;
 and the battle bow shall be cut off,
 and he shall command peace to the nations;
 his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
 and from the River to the ends of the earth. (9:10)

But the peace that Jesus brings was not simply a tranquil, orderly life, without the scourge of war. Rather it was more like the Hebrew *Shalom*. It is proclaimed and lived and demonstrated in humble service. It is more than personal salvation. The Chair of World Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York, J. C. Haekendijk (hoo' ken dak') once said, "It [*Shalom*] is at once peace, integrity, community, harmony, and justice." Jesus is the Prince of Shalom—the Prince of Peace.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (Jn. 14:27)

Lowliness, peace, what else? Matthew is interested in *justice*. Immediately following his account of Palm Sunday, Matthew proceeds at once to relate the story of the purging of the Temple with the preceding events. For him it was a natural sequel to the royal entrance.

As Jerusalem was the city of the great king, the Temple was his house, his royal palace; and accordingly Jesus enters it and takes possession in the name of his Father. Micah had said,

"And what does the Lord require? That a person do justice." (6:8)

The Messiah is just and will not tolerate the degradation of the temple. And so Jesus drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them:

"It is written,
 'My house shall be called a house of prayer';
 but you are making it a den of robbers." (Mt. 21:13)

Characteristic of the kingdom of Christ is justice and righteousness.

It may be that in our needed emphasis on the mercy of God we have forgotten his justice. God's rule is always both loving and just. Some almost ignore the season of Lent. Of choosing a hard and narrow way that leads to life. Bearing fruit in season and out. Of faithful stewardship. Of prayer and fasting. Have we forgotten the agony of the Passion Story? Have we forgotten the Wilderness of Temptation? Have we forgotten the tears of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? Have we forgotten Good Friday in the celebration of Easter? Have we forgotten the cost of discipleship? Have we preached Christ without the cross and made the costly grace of God something cheap and frivolous? (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) Characteristic of the Kingdom is justice and righteousness.

But Matthew says something else happened in the Temple. The old Temple had become a den of thieves. But by Christ's presence it became a place of healing. The blind and the lame came to him and were healed. *Healing* is characteristic of the Kingdom.

In Matthew 8 and 9, in these two chapters alone we find four specific healings, two specific deliverances from demons, a raising from the dead, and the statement that "Jesus cast out the spirits and with a word healed all who were sick." (8:16) Blind, lame, lepers, demoniacs, epileptics, those with blood disease, those with speech impediments—they came to Jesus and were healed. People whose lives were barren and out of season were given new life. But beyond that, Jesus gave himself for the healing of a sin-sick world.

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.
(1 Peter 2:23-24)

Lowliness, peace, justice, healing, and finally—*inclusion*. And here it is the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Matthew says:

But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,
 ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
 you have prepared praise for yourself?’” (21:15-16)

John Calvin, in defending the practice of infant baptism, points to Jesus’ way of relating to children. As we see in Matthew 19:13-15, Jesus invited little children to come to him and blessed them. Jesus gave an example by which the world could understand that he came “to enlarge rather than limit (our understanding of) the father’s mercy.” Thus Jesus tenderly embraced children offered to him and rebuked his disciples for trying to keep them away—the disciples were shutting out those to whom the Kingdom belonged. Young, old; male, female; Jew, Gentile; rich, poor; slave, free—all can find joy in the Kingdom of Christ.

Lowliness, peace, justice, healing, inclusion—characteristics of the Kingdom of Christ. So what else can we say about this kingdom?

Luke tells us this:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” (17:20-21)

And Mark tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (1:14-15)

To say that God’s Kingdom is at hand is to say there is present the possibility and opportunity for people, for you and me, to live by a different power and order from the cultures, societies, peers, media, educational institutions, and governments that can determine our life. In

announcing God's Kingdom, Jesus has to be heard as announcing an alternative. In the midst of all the people and organizations which seek, hold, and wield power and authority, he announces, not just advocates, he *announces* another power structure. In the presence of governors, presidents, and congressmen; in the presence of party leaders and candidates; media elites and Hollywood celebrities; board chairmen and labor leaders—Jesus says there is an alternative order or kingdom. And we have a choice—God's Kingdom or the kingdoms of this world.

God's Kingdom of lowliness, peace, justice, healing, and inclusion is at hand and is in our midst. Be not conformed to the standards of this world; but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. (Rm. 12:2a)

And until he comes again in the fullness of his glory, we can choose to entrust our lives to the gentle King and live in his peaceable Kingdom. We can do so in response to this one who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Who would soon be put to death. But the chains of death could not hold him, his truth, his love, his life, and the emergence of his Kingdom.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.