

The Return of the King
Matthew 21:1-17
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Matthew is no J.R.R Tolkien, although they do have a story in common. It's called "The Return of the King." You probably know the more modern version better, in which Aragorn, heir of Isildur, hacks and slays his way through legions of orcs, goblins, and trolls, reclaims the throne of Gondor to the universal delight of that kingdom, marries his Elven bride, and rules the realm happily ever after. That's a great story, one of my favorites. But it's not the Jesus story, the one that really matters. The one that matters is the other "return of the King" story, the one that Matthew tells, that although it doesn't turn out quite so stereotypically, has an even happier ending.

Part of that story is played out in tonight's passage in which we remember when Jesus enters Jerusalem to the accolades of the poor and the blind and the lame that had accompanied him on his journey there, only to find the residents of that city not quite so enthusiastic. Yes, the crowd on the outside of the city gate is a different one than on the other side, and Jesus' entrance is met with a collective "Who *is* this?" which really is the right question, even if it was probably asked that day in a more sarcastic or dismissive tone, more like "Who is *this*?"

Matthew has a flair for the dramatic almost as keen as Tolkien, if offered in substantially fewer words. "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in

turmoil asking, ‘Who is this?’ ” Of course, what he really means to say is that the whole city was shaking in its shoes, since the Greek word that gets translated as “turmoil” was usually used to describe things like thunderstorms, earthquakes, and other pretty frightening natural phenomenon that send people fleeing for shelter or running out into the street. So for those originally hearing that word, he makes it sound like zombies were wandering the streets of Jerusalem or that giant rats were chasing people out of their homes. What exactly the people of Jerusalem were afraid of is up for debate, since most scholars agree it is pretty likely that the number of people cheering for Jesus was probably not really that awe-inspiring. The folks who were laying down their cloaks and their palm branches were surely sincere and genuinely enthusiastic, but they weren’t much more than a pretty minor collection of people from the backwaters of Judea and probably not very scary to anyone. You see, this was Jesus’ first trip to Jerusalem during his public ministry and so it is unlikely that any of his followers were from the big city. On top of that, many of those same scholars believe that here were actually two entrances being made that day, the one we’ve read about, but also one by Pontius Pilate, the regional governor who had come to town with the military to make a show of Roman strength at the beginning of the Passover festival. And that one would have caused the foundations of the city to shake far more than Jesus on his donkey. But what Matthew the historian chooses to ignore, Matthew the dramatist makes up for with a description of what they should have been feeling when Jesus rode into

town that day, a turmoil of the heart the likes of which the Romans with all their might could never truly inspire.

Palm Sunday is often portrayed as the arrival of the King. But that is only partly true. The real truth that Matthew is at pains to show, from the beginning to the end of his Gospel, is that Palm Sunday is not the arrival of the King. It is the Return of the King. This is not a new king come to reign, but an exiled king returning to claim his throne. He's always been king. You will remember that the second chapter of the Gospel tells the story of how King Herod, upon learning from the wise men of the east that the "King of the Jews" had been born in Bethlehem, went on a rampage and killed all of Bethlehem's male children under the age of two to make sure he eliminated that threat, a fate Jesus escaped only because his father had been warned in a dream and whisked the family off to Egypt, the beginning of his exile. And even when Joseph received another dream that Herod was dead, he still couldn't go home to Bethlehem, because of its proximity to the continuing dangers of Jerusalem, and so instead settled the family in Nazareth where the exile continued while the prophecy was being fulfilled.

But now Jesus is making his way home, and when he gets there, he wants to make some changes. No more profiteering. No more lording it over people with less education or social standing. No more violence and doubletalk. No more of any of the stuff that the prophets always said stood in the way of the true covenantal relationship God desired with God's people, the relationship which

would make them the light unto the nations, and Jerusalem a city on a hill. It is this high calling of Jerusalem that Jesus returns to claim, for it is the ticket to the blessing of God's peace for all the earth. But what does he find when he gets there? "Who is *this*?" and "Do you hear what *these children* are saying?", questions which foreshadow the ultimate rejection his return will face a few days later, a rejection which seals Jerusalem's fate as the faded glory of Israel. What Jesus told the woman at the well will come to pass, that "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." But "these" true worshippers were not found in Jerusalem, and the rest, as they say, is history.

And so the return of the king doesn't go as we might have expected it to go, knowing the resources as Jesus' disposal. And thank God for that. Thank God that we no longer think of the divine presence as residing in a city, rather than in us, in our hearts, minds, and spirits. Thank God that we now have our own choice of whether or not to let the King come through the gates of our lives, rather than that decision being made by the religious gatekeepers in our lives. But wait a minute. Does that mean I have to let the King rule my life?

Joseph Tson was pastor of a Baptist Church, in Romania, until he was exiled by the Romanian government in 1981. In Pastoral Renewal Magazine, he wrote of his experience, saying, "Years ago I ran away from my country to study theology

at Oxford. In 1972, when I was ready to go back to Romania, I discussed my plans with some fellow students. They pointed out that I might be arrested at the border. One student asked, ‘Joseph, what chances do you have of successfully implementing your plans?’ ”

He asked God about it, and God brought to mind Matthew 10:16 – “I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves” -- and seemed to say, “Tell me, what chance does a sheep surrounded by wolves have of surviving five minutes, let alone of converting the wolves? Joseph, that’s how I send you: totally defenseless and without a reasonable hope of success. If you are willing to go like that, go. If you are not willing to be in that position, don’t go.”

Tson writes: “After our return, as I preached uninhibitedly, harassment and arrests came. One day during interrogation an officer threatened to kill me. Then I said, ‘Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood. Whoever listens to them after that will say, ‘I’d better listen. This man sealed it with his blood.’ They will speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me. I win the supreme victory then.’ ”

The officer sent him home. “That gave me pause. For years, I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive. I had accepted all the restrictions the authorities put on me because I wanted to live. Now I wanted to die, and they wouldn’t oblige. Now I could do whatever I wanted in Romania. For

years I wanted to save my life, and I was losing it. Now that I wanted to lose it, I was winning it.”

“For years I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive.”
Ouch. That stings a little, doesn’t it? For how many of you does that ring true? It does for me, I am sorry to say. I want to “survive” and I am not even under threat! I want to survive my retirement. I want to survive socially in my circle of friends and family and neighbors. I want to survive without being ridiculed or called a Jesus freak. I want to survive without being ostracized or sitting alone in the cafeteria, or getting locked up in a mental health ward somewhere. But that kind of cautious survival is a luxury I can ill-afford upon the return of the King.

I sometimes think we have a lot of nerve, really, identifying ourselves as the followers of Jesus. We are actually a lot more like the inhabitants of Jerusalem than the crowds who came with Jesus to Jerusalem. We are not the poor and the blind and the lame of the countryside. We are the religious elite. We are the ones who are in bed with the powers that be. We are the ones with something to lose. As white, wealthy, North Americans or Europeans, we should always read the Gospels as if we were the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees, not the disciples or the people Jesus healed and transformed. Sure, we may have overcome some of our Pharisee-like tendencies; we preach a gospel that sounds a lot like that of Jesus. But when it comes to really making the sacrifices he calls us to make, our Gospel often goes lite. I’ll gladly point the finger at myself first. I’ll be the first to tell you

that the world is way more complicated than it used to be and so there's no hope much will change, that if I gave away all my possessions, no one else would rise out of poverty, that when Jesus tells me to cut off my hand or gouge out my eye to avoid sin, he is just exaggerating for effect. Yes, I can self-justify with the best of them. But none of that changes the fact that Jesus is calling me to far more radical existence than I am usually willing to live. I should be in turmoil, shaking in my shoes, like that Greek word suggests. Jesus is coming back into my house and calling me out into the street to wave palms, and to shout Hosanna to the Son of David, and to drive the moneychangers out of the Temple, and to repent of being the hypocrite I truly am.

“For years,” Joseph Tson said, “I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive.” But then the King returned home from exile and put a claim on his heart that changed it, and emboldened it, and let it be offered up as a sacrifice. This is the response Jesus wanted when he arrived in Jerusalem, this is the response the returning king deserves. This is the response that the law demanded and the prophets have preached since forever. This is the response that is still demanded from each one of us who claim that Christ is our king.

If we do it right, Palm Sunday is that Lent-culminating recognition that Jesus wants to enter our lives and reclaim what is rightfully his. He returns from the exile caused by our sin and wants to clean our houses. How we respond to his coming through the gate will determine how we will live in his Kingdom: as faithful

subjects, or as warring rebels, as those willing to die for the king, or those wanting to kill him. May this Holy Week be a time of reflection on the daily entrance of Jesus Christ into your life, and the daily response you make to the return of the King. Amen.