

Who Is This?
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 10-AM Service
Reverend John Steigenga
Matthew 21:1-11

I have an old friend. Well really, I have mostly old friends; even new friends are old. Anyway, a few weeks ago this particular old friend sent me a copy of his recently written autobiography. It was very interesting, especially where he described his childhood in the Netherlands during the war years when the village where he lived with his family was under Nazi occupation.

We know very little about Jesus' early life. Like the other gospel writers, Matthew did not set out to write a biography of Jesus. He includes some biographical details such as the visit of the Magi, Herod's brutality, and the escape of Mary, Joseph and Jesus to Egypt before eventually settling in Nazareth. Matthew's purpose was not to write a biography but rather to bring people to faith, first his fellow Jews and then gentiles as well. Matthew was an evangelist. As he writes some twenty or thirty years after Jesus' ascension, he can still hear the "Hosannas" and feel the press of the crowd as if it were yesterday. Jerusalem was swollen with Passover pilgrims from near and far who were puzzled about the fuss over a man on a donkey's colt. He remembers the question they asked: "Who is this?" We could say his entire gospel was written to answer that question. Today the focus is on Jesus' so-called "Triumphal Entry." "Who is this?" Two answers are given in this story.

First, the answer of "the crowd: "This is Jesus," people said "the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." By this time in his ministry Jesus was often called a prophet. "Who do people say I am?" Jesus once asked his disciples. "Some say John the Baptist, or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets," they told him. Jesus called himself a prophet when he preached in Nazareth and people were offended. "No prophet is accepted in his home town," he said. So the crowd was right but their answer seemed to go further. Notice the definite article, not a prophet but "the prophet." In Israel there was one prophet in particular who was longed for, the one promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him." But how can "the prophet" come from a backwater place like Nazareth in Galilee? Remember Nathaniel's question when his friends told him they had found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" That strange duality or dialectic is central to the gospel. Jesus is "the prophet" and he is from Nazareth. He is the Son of God and he is a son of Mary. He is the eternal Word and he is a fully human being. Who is this? So the crowd was right; he was the long promised prophet, who had come not only to speak the word of God but to be "the Word made flesh." Yet, that was not a complete answer.

Let's look at Jesus' answer. It was less with words than with actions. Sometimes when words alone were not enough the prophets acted out their message. Jesus didn't stand on the top of the Mt. of Olives and shout, "I am the Messiah King!" Rather he acts out the words of the prophet Zechariah: "Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.'" The crowd spread their cloaks on the road; others cut down branches and put them down. Somebody started "Hosanna to the Son of David" and the crowd picked it up. When the noise reached Jerusalem people poured out of the gate to join the procession and the hillside rang with their shouts: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he

who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” They didn’t invent those words; they were quoting Psalm 118. It was both prayer and praise: “O Lord, save us...O Lord be praised here and in heaven.”

Jesus set it all up. What we call “Palm Sunday” was not an accident or happenstance. It wasn’t as if Jesus just got caught up in the crowd’s festive mood. He planned it and set it in motion. He sent two disciples to get the donkey and its colt. He rode on the colt to fulfill the prophecy. He intentionally presented himself as the Messiah King, knowing the effect it would have and what it would lead to. Jesus claims the title of King and this was his coronation day. The people were on board, they were wildly enthusiastic. They couldn’t wait to see him in action. But their idea of kingly action turned out to be worlds apart from his. “Who is this?” Why, he’s the Messiah King. Yes, but what kind of king?

In Israel’s history kings were deliverers. When Jehu was anointed king the people took off their cloaks and laid them down before him. They blew a trumpet and shouted, “Jehu is king.” Jehu was a man of action. His first action was to ride out and kill both the current king of Judah and of Israel. Many in the “Palm Sunday” crowd would have welcomed Jesus as a Jehu. But Jesus hadn’t come to be that kind of king. That was the unspoken message of his mount: he rides on a donkey’s colt. A donkey didn’t represent violence but peace. When Alexander the Great rode into Jerusalem 300 years earlier he was on a magnificent warhorse, symbolizing violence and earthly power. Make no mistake, this is the Son of God; this is the eternal King of Kings, riding on a donkey; God on a beast of burden.

In a Palm Sunday sermon, the late Rev. James VanTholen said that Jesus’ enemies saw him as an outlaw and by the end of the week they would succeed in having him hung. If he was an outlaw he would merely die for himself, his death for his life. But if he dies as the king he dies as a representative; he dies for his subjects – all who accept his kingship. All 4 of the gospel writers include this story and all take pains to have us see Jesus embracing the mantle of kingship. He did not take it off when he went to the cross; it was symbolized by that crude and cruel crown of thorns. It was as the Messiah King that he died. That’s why his death redeems us.

“Hosanna, save us!” the people cried. But the salvation they hoped for was from Roman corruption, not their own. “They were praising a Messiah who was going to kill to save them not a Messiah was going to die to save them.” (VanTholen) They were right to declare him their king. Pilate was right when he put that sardonic sign above Jesus’ bloodied head on the cross: “The King of the Jews.”

But both the people and Pilate missed the point. What kind of king rides into town on a donkey? What kind of king submits to a murderous mob? What kind of king looks more like a loser than a winner? That’s the mystery of Palm Sunday.

The people wanted him to be their Herod substitute. They dreamed of a return to the golden age of David and Solomon. They hailed him as the leader who would make Israel great again. The last thing they wanted (but the first thing they needed) was a king who would suffer and die. Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my Kingdom is from another place.” He did not say my kingdom is not in this world. It is very much in this world. Jesus taught us to pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” Wherever God’s people “seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God” his kingdom comes. But his kingdom is not of this world and it is not to be identified with any worldly power.

In every age people try to claim Jesus for their side, their party, their nation or their political agenda. As followers of Jesus we must resist that. Many years ago when the late

congressman Paul Henry served in the Michigan House of Representatives he was asked to give the invocation at the beginning of a legislative session. The atmosphere had been particularly rancorous with Republicans and Democrats deeply divided over a controversial issue. Paul stepped to the podium, asked the members to bow their heads, and prayed, “God our father, we know that you are not a Democrat, but help us remember that you are not a Republican either. Give us guidance and bring us together to do what is right and just for the people of our state.” Paul once told me that he had once heard Rev. Eppinga offer a similar prayer. Paul had such strong convictions about this issue that he said that those who seek to exploit the Christian label in non-Christian ways are “using Christ’s name in vain.”

Jesus is the Messiah King but a very different kind of king from those of this world. Martin Luther wrote, “Look at him! He rides no stallion, which is a war animal, and he comes not with fearful pomp and power, but sits on a donkey... which is ready for the burdens of work that will help human beings. Thereby he shows that he does not come to terrify people, to drive or oppress them, but to help them to carry their burdens and take them on himself.”

Many of us know Philip Yancey as the author of wonderful books like “What’s So Amazing About Grace” and many others that explore the grace theme. But in his recently published autobiography he tells about growing up in a church and a home where rules, judgment and fear were heavy burdens under which Philip’s young soul shriveled. By the time he was in college he was an agnostic, even though he was in a conservative Bible college. He tells about an incident that profoundly shaped his life and future. Students in that college were required to do some sort of missionary field work. Though he was an agnostic Philip joined a team of 3 other students who would go to the local state university to witness on a regular basis. Each week the 4 students would also meet for prayer. They would take turns praying, except for Philip; he never prayed. But then one night he did. He began, “God...” He started again, “God, here we are, supposed to be concerned about those ten thousand students at the university who are going to hell. Well, you know I don’t care if they all go to Hell, if there is one. I don’t care if I go to hell.”

No one in the group moved or said anything. Then he went on. For some reason he’d been thinking recently about the parable of the Good Samaritan. He prayed, “We’re supposed to feel the same concerns for university students as the Samaritan felt for that bloodied Jew lying in the ditch. I feel no such concern, I feel nothing.”

Then something happened. He had been visualizing the scene: a swarthy Middle Eastern man, dressed in robes and a turban, bending over a dirty, blood-stained form in a ditch. But, he says, “without warning, those two figures now morph on the internal screen of my mind. The Samaritan takes on the face of Jesus. The Jew, pitiable victim of a highway robbery, also takes on another face – one I recognize as my own.”

“In slow motion I watch Jesus reach down with a moistened rag to clean my wounds and stanch the flow of blood. As he bends toward me, I see myself, the wounded victim of a crime, open my eyes and spit on him, full in the face. Just that.” Philip writes, “The image unnerves me – the apostate who doesn’t believe in visions or in biblical parables. I am rendered speechless. Abruptly, I stop praying, rise, and leave the room.”

Later, reflecting on that experience he said, “Then it hit me. I was the tramp and God was trying to help me. Every time he leaned over me I spit in his face. What’s more, I wanted to remain a tramp. An intelligent, sophisticated tramp by choice.” Clearly, that wasn’t what God had in mind for Philip Yancey. As he ends the book he writes this testimony: “I came to love God out of gratitude, not fear.”

“Who is this?” This is the King who loves his people so much that he died to redeem them. This is the King who conquered death by dying. This is the King who lives and reigns forever. This is the king who will come again on the clouds of glory. This is the king before whom every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And this is the King who does not wish to lay burdens on you but to carry them for you. “Come to me,” he said, “all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.

Prayer: Jesus our Lord and King, we bow before you. We stand in awe of you. You left your throne for us. You suffered and died for us. You love us even when we do not love you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Amen.

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