

The King is coming!

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Palm Sunday 13th April 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Luke 19:29-48

Introduction: What qualities would you look for in a

- **President**
- **Prime Minister**
- **Archbishop**
- **King or Queen?**

In today's world, most countries are ruled by elected leaders. In the UK, the top leader is the Prime Minister, the leader of the party that has been elected to be the Government. In the United States the President is the Head of State, and has enormous powers, at least so it seems from recent events across "the pond". One man has the power to change the economic order of the entire world with a few executive orders. I wonder what the American voters were looking for in their choice of President?

One quality which voters tend to look for in political leaders is strength of character – someone who knows what they believe in and what they want to achieve, who can therefore provide leadership and tackle the problems facing the country, however they define them. This certainly seems to be the way many Russian voters view President Putin, who projects the image of the strong man. Donald Trump's vision of "making America great again" clearly touched a chord with many Americans.

A charismatic personality also seems to be a winner at the polls. You may or may not find Trump or Putin attractive, but many of their voters clearly do.

Another quality that is surely important in a political leader is the desire to do the best for the people they rule over. Integrity is a quality that goes with this. When leaders indulge in corrupt practices in order to amass wealth and power for themselves at the expense of the nation, they risk being ousted by their people, and often have to use repressive and violent tactics to quell opposition.

The promise of the Messiah

Two thousand years ago, the Jewish people were suffering under Roman rule. In addition, ordinary people resented being oppressed by the power of wealthy landowners and the ruling Jewish priestly elite. Centuries before, prophets had spoken of the coming of a Messiah, a descendant of the great King David, who would put the world to rights and rule over the nations, bringing Israel back to its former glory. The coming of the Messiah was awaited more eagerly than ever, and with Jesus' reputation as a charismatic leader who cared for the poor and could even do miracles, many were asking if he was the One God was sending to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

The claim of Jesus

Up to now Jesus has been very careful not to say that he was the Messiah. When he asked his close disciples in private who they thought he was, and when Peter declared "you are

God's Messiah", Jesus had ordered them to keep it a secret.¹ But now he was going to make a bold claim, not in words but by a symbolic gesture: he sends two of his disciples to borrow a donkey for him to ride into the city on. Anyone interested in recognising the Messiah would have known the prophecy in the book of Zechariah, and the gospels of Matthew and John quote this:

‘Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’²

Jesus’ decision to enter Jerusalem on a donkey was a deliberate claim to be the Messiah. But the prophecy depicted a humble Messiah, who was coming in peace. Donkeys were not warhorses. And the donkey Jesus rode on that day had never been ridden before, let alone been trained for war.

Judgement is coming

But there is no doubt in Jesus’ mind that war is coming. He knows that the people are fickle and their leaders are resistant to God’s ways. Jesus knows that the people are not ready for the Kingdom of God. The Messiah will be rejected, and God will leave his people to the fate they are storing up for themselves. As he and the crowd with him descend the Mount of Olives towards the gates of Jerusalem, he pauses and weeps over Jerusalem, the city which in less than forty

¹ Luke 9:18-22

² Matthew 21:5 (NRSV), quoting Zechariah 9:9; see also John 12:15

years' time will be surrounded by Roman armies and destroyed.

'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'³

Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Zechariah, choosing the donkey as a symbol of his humility. But humility is not weakness. Jesus goes into the Temple and in a display of anger drives out the money-changers and those who were selling animals for sacrifice.

It's not that Jesus suddenly loses his cool. It's a prophetic act, showing the displeasure of God at the way the Temple's purpose as a place of prayer is being undermined by commercial interests. Jesus underlines his point by his quoting from Isaiah and Jeremiah.

"My house shall be a house of prayer";
but you have made it a den of robbers.⁴

Jesus challenges the priestly elite, and when they later ask him by what authority he is acting, he asks them to tell him on whose authority John the Baptist was acting.⁵ It's typical of Jesus that he wants people to look at the evidence that is

³ Luke 19:42-44 NRSV

⁴ Luke 19:46, Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11

⁵ Luke 20:1-8

in front of them and make their own decision to submit to the authority of God, which will include acknowledging Jesus as the true Messiah.

What kind of King?

At no point so far has Jesus actually said “I am the Messiah”. But that is clearly his implied claim, one which the Jewish authorities reject. And yet it proves to be the argument which they can use to persuade the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, that Jesus has to be done away with. A few days later, they arrest Jesus and take him to the Governor with the accusation:

‘We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.’⁶

In John’s Gospel we hear a fuller version of the conversation that ensues between Jesus and Pilate. “Are you the King of the Jews?” asks Pilate. “My kingdom is not of this world”, replies Jesus.⁷ And later, when Jesus has been beaten and mistreated by Pilate’s soldiers and comes back to Pilate wearing a crown of thorns, he reminds Pilate that Pilate himself is accountable to a higher authority – not Rome, but God.

“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”⁸

⁶ Luke 23:2 NRSV

⁷ John 18:33,36

⁸ John 19:11

Jesus has already reminded the High Priest that he, too, is accountable to God and to his Messiah. When the High Priest asked him if he were the Messiah, Jesus answered,

‘If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸ and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.’⁹

Jesus our King?

We have seen how Jesus invited people in his own day to look at the evidence and make up their minds whether to acknowledge him as King. The invitation come to us also. As we listen to the story of the Passion this week, and as we hear the amazing news of Jesus’ resurrection next Sunday, what will be our response?

Please note, that we are not being invited to elect Jesus as our King if we think he meets our criteria. The claim of the Christian faith is that Jesus *is* the King. One day we will see him seated at the right hand of the power of God, if not in our lifetime then certainly when we die. The invitation to us is to hear the story, recognise Jesus as our King and submit to his authority in our lives.

Jesus is a King who chose the path of humility and service, emptying himself of his divine glory in order to become human and suffer on the Cross to save us from our sins. In the words of a modern hymn, he was the Servant King, who came to earth “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”¹⁰. He is now exalted by God to the

⁹ Luke 22:67-68 NRSV, compare Mark 14:62, referencing Daniel 7:13

¹⁰ Mark 10:45

highest position in the universe, so that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow”.¹¹

One day we will have to acknowledge Jesus as King. What would it mean for you and me to really acknowledge Jesus as our King *now*, and live each day in service to him and to others? It cost Jesus everything to save us from our sins – betrayal, abandonment, scorn and beatings, crucifixion and separation from God as he bore the sins of the whole world. What will it cost *us* to serve him and others? What are we willing to sacrifice in terms of our money, our time, our love and our energy day by day?

As we reflect on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus this Holy Week, let us ask ourselves not whether Jesus is a king worth serving, but how we might in some way offer worship and practical service worthy of the King of kings.

¹¹ Philippians 2:6-11