

What Kind of King? by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/13/25

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” the multitude of disciples cry. “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” They are quoting Psalm 118 – well, almost. “Blessed is the ONE who comes in the name of the Lord” would have been a more accurate quote of the pilgrimage prayer that is Psalm 118. But the people ushering Jesus into Jerusalem by shouting their praise and throwing their cloaks on the ground aren’t welcoming just any “one” – they are greeting the one they have come to adore as king. “Blessed is the KING who comes in the name of the Lord,” they call. And to this well-known and well-used psalm quotation they add a line that sounds like the song of the multitude of the heavenly host who appeared to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Luke’s account of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem is dense with references, to other parts of his own gospel and to the Hebrew Scriptures. We get hints of Psalm 118, of Zechariah’s prophecy about a king of humble birth riding a young donkey; we get callbacks to anointing ceremonies for ancient Israelite kings where the people spread cloaks on the ground to welcome their new ruler; and we hear echoes of the prophet Habakkuk’s insistence that where people do evil for their own gain, even the stones of their houses will cry out for justice to God.

What we don’t get is palms. Did you notice that? Nowhere in Luke’s account of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem does he mention palm branches, either waved in the air or strewn on the ground. Nor are there any hosannas. Hosanna, a phrase which also has its roots in Psalm 118, a cry for salvation meaning literally “save, please!” or “save us, we pray!” In all the other gospels’ versions of this story, the crowds cry “hosanna” as they greet Jesus; we take this same cry on our lips in the liturgy we pray and the psalms we sing as we worship on this day we call Palm Sunday. But no one says it in Luke.

And about the crowd – who is here to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem, his final destination? Matthew, Mark and John account them “a very large crowd,” “many people,” and a “great crowd that had come for the [Passover] festival,” respectively. But Luke again tells a different story: Jesus is greeted by “the whole multitude of the disciples.” It’s not just anyone who happens to be in Jerusalem suddenly praising God joyfully with a loud voice when Jesus comes to town. It’s Jesus’s disciples – the people who have already been following him. And they are praising God for the deeds of power that they have seen Jesus perform.

When our four gospels don’t quite agree, we do well to focus on the story each gospel writer is trying to tell us. Just as four people witnessing the same event today would tell four different stories about what happened, our four evangelists notice different details and shape their narratives in unique ways to tell us what they think we need to know about Jesus. So what is no palms, no hosannas, no crowds Luke trying to tell us about what Jesus is up to as he enters Jerusalem?

First of all, king Jesus, he’s not your average ruler. He does not come riding into the capital city of this Roman vassal state in the way an imperially-appointed governor would. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, likely entered Jerusalem riding a chariot drawn by war horses, decked in armor, carrying weapons, supported by troops, displaying the full might of the empire and in the process providing a silent but powerful warning to anyone who might think about trying to gin up a revolt against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory of Judea.

Jesus’s strength, however, comes from humility, not from a display of state power. He comes riding into the capital city on a borrowed donkey, a working-man’s ride, an animal used to plow the fields; a symbol of peace, not war. A young donkey, as foretold by the prophet Zechariah, who promised that a victorious king would come to bring peace, to rid Jerusalem of war horses and chariots and weapons and to offer God’s lasting shalom to all nations. King Jesus rides alone, not commanding an army or flanked by an armored guard, but offering himself as he is, in his everyday robe – this perfectly ordinary son of a perfectly ordinary couple from the perfectly ordinary town of Nazareth.

In response to his drawing near, all Jesus’s disciples come to greet him and praise God for the deeds of power that they have witnessed him perform. Jesus’s deeds of power were not the sort that would normally earn you a triumphal procession in the Roman Empire, deeds like conquering enemy cities and defeating their armies. Instead, Jesus’s deeds of power were deeds of compassion and mercy, deeds of radical welcome: healing the sick, hearing the stories of the suffering, inspiring tax collectors to return what they had extorted from the populace, reintegrating outcasts into their communities, feeding thousands of people, reviving the dead, bringing good news to the poor, spinning powerful parables, teaching people to love their enemies, showing multitudes the way to live in harmony with God and one another. *These* were the powerful deeds worthy of the disciples’ praise – deeds not of warfare and destruction, not of conquering might and imperial strength, but deeds that manifested the power of God’s love for all of creation.

On this Palm Sunday without palms, this is the king we worship: a king who knows the power of service, a king whose strength comes not from military might or from wealth but from God's all-powerful love joined to the humility our full humanity, a king who meets people as they are and proclaims a kingdom of peace. A king who instead of using the instruments of state power to control the people is willing to die by one to save the people – to offer himself on a Roman imperial cross. This is the king who rides into Jerusalem today, and this is the king who rides into our hearts today. Do we accept him as our Lord and Savior?

In the first century, to claim Jesus as Lord was a profoundly political statement. There was one lord in the Roman Empire, and that lord was Caesar. To claim Jesus as Lord was to reject Caesar as lord. The Pharisees in our reading for today knew that: they warned Jesus to order his disciples to stop their parade, to quiet their loud shouts of praise. We often think of the Pharisees as the bad guys in the gospels, trying to block Jesus from fulfilling his mission. But perhaps they were trying to save Jesus's life – to claim to be some kind of king was to challenge the authority of Rome and thus to put oneself at risk of Roman retribution.

Today when we claim Jesus as Lord, we are also making a profoundly political statement. As American Franciscan priest and writer Richard Rohr says, "If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not! If Jesus is Lord, then the economy and stock market are not. If Jesus is Lord, then my house and possessions, family and job are not. If Jesus is Lord, then my country is not. If Jesus is Lord, then I am not!" On the one hand, in days of roiling markets and economic instability, remembering that Jesus is Lord, not the stock market – that can be a deep comfort to us. Our identities, our hopes, our futures do not come from anything we possess, but from God alone. We can take a deep breath, turn off our phones for a while, and rest secure in God's compassionate goodness towards us.

And on the other hand, proclaiming Jesus as Lord instead of the stock market or our country or anything of human creation provides a deep challenge to us. How do we let our national story or our economic priorities shape our lives in ways that are counter to the reconciling Lordship of Jesus Christ? And how are we living out the priorities of Jesus's peaceful kingdom in our everyday lives?

In response to the second question, I offer a hopeful story from our own city. A few years ago, our siblings in the Reformed tradition at Old First Reformed United Church of Christ at 4th and Race sat down to talk about their homeless ministry. They had been providing a wintertime cold weather shelter in their church building for over thirty years, but what were they really doing *about* homelessness? Their discussion led them to focus in on an underutilized corner of the church property that had a small parking lot and two rowhomes on it, one of historical value and one added on in the 70s. They began to wonder if they could use that part of the property to provide permanent low-income housing instead.

There were certainly challenges. Where would they get the money and how could they work around the historical building? They began exploring their options with a non-profit developer. Eventually the church agreed to a 99-year lease with the developer, for \$1. Funding came through government grants and tax credits. Someone had the smart idea to move the row home worth saving to the corner of the property, making way for a larger apartment building and restoring the historical facade of the home in the process. COVID slowed the project down a bit, but the building is finally complete. This spring, the first residents have begun to move in.

To qualify for funding, low-income housing initiatives must be occupied by people with incomes below 60% of the Area Median Income – for this project, the target is individuals with 20% of the Area Median Income. Residents pay about \$200 per month to live in small apartments with shared kitchens. "Creating community is the overarching theme of the project," said one of the developers. A national nonprofit is providing support services to the residents, and church members from Old First are providing welcome baskets as each new person moves in. Church and residents share a garden in the courtyard, and a ground-floor retail space aims to provide a point of contact with the neighborhood.

As Christian people we follow a merciful and compassionate Lord: a Lord whose deeds of power are healing the sick, caring for the vulnerable, restoring relationships and ushering in a reign of peace. When we make Jesus the Lord of our lives, his values become our values. And we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to join him in his work of creating a more just world, a world where everyone has a home, a world ruled not by the power of violent Caesars, but by humble servants. Sometimes, like the folks at Old First Reformed, we may find that we can collaborate with our communities and the government to live out Jesus's call to compassionate care of our neighbors. Other times, like Jesus in this fateful Holy Week, we may find that being people committed to justice and peace puts us at odds with the powers that be. Either way, we cry, "blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" – and trust God to be with us, whatever deeds of power our Lord may call us to do.