

CORONATION DAY

By Palm Sunday, Jesus was through fooling around. He had done many miracles; He had told provocative parables; He had adopted the prophetic title “Son of Man”; He had dropped a thousand hints from one end of Palestine to the other. Patiently and consistently, Jesus had provided the evidence – all the evidence any person should have needed in first-century Palestine. It all pointed to one conclusion: Jesus was the long-awaited, long-expected Messiah. Jesus was the Rightful King of Israel. Jesus was God’s “chosen one,” the focal point and fulfillment of Israel’s destiny and purpose.

As an aside, please note that God does not straight-arm us. This is essentially a gentle story – from God’s side. However dramatic it seems to us, however much humans turn it to violence – from God’s side, it is a pretty gentle touch. God does not come storming into our history or into our lives with thunderbolts, earthquakes, war, or pestilence, smashing everyone who gets in the way or disagrees. If that is what you are waiting for, forget it. God wants a relationship, and so God wants us to “get it” – to comprehend his presence for ourselves, to discover it genuinely. God goes to great lengths to *not* overwhelm us, to *not* override all our circuits, to *not* get us into a position where we are forced to conclude what God would rather have us awaken to and rejoice in.

Many people prefer to go on with their lives in their own way until God “makes” them behave. Have you ever watched little children? Some of us are waiting – waiting until God *makes* us believe. But that will not happen. God waits for us to come part of the way on our own desire and willingness, and of our own free choice. And, sad to say, we cannot outwait God. That’s the reason for about ninety percent of the suffering in our world. We are trying to outwait God, playing hard-to-get, doing things our own way ... waiting for God to come *make us* believe and behave.

By Palm Sunday, the evidence was overwhelming for anybody who was not determined to ignore it. There should have been little doubt left in anyone’s mind. Only the Messiah could have the power that Jesus was displaying. Only the Messiah could have the wisdom and understanding that Jesus was revealing. But people also assumed that the Messiah would use military might. They assumed the Messiah would smash anybody who got in the way or disagreed. Jesus’ failure to do this smashing

and destroying is why Jews do not believe in Him to this day. It is why many “Christians” do not fully believe in Him yet either. At least half of Christendom is still waiting for Jesus to “come again” – to return and do this smashing and destroying because He did not do it right the first time. Waiting for kingdom come, waiting to give our full allegiance and support ... waiting, when the Kingdom has already come, and Jesus is already in our midst – waiting for *us!*

Jesus *did* do it right the first time. Jesus rejected the smashing-and-destroying approach as unusable for His purposes. God wants the relationship, and you cannot get that by physical force. God works to convince, to change – from within. God builds on growth, learning, comprehension, awakening. If you are waiting for blood in the streets before you join God’s Kingdom, you will wait forever. You cannot outwait God. And the only blood God willingly sheds ... is his own. God is never going to beat up the people we do not like; he will just wait for us to convert them. It’s a bitter pill to swallow, but we better get used to it.

So, many people were not ready for the long-expected Messiah. Or they were unable to recognize or deal with a Messiah who requested cooperation instead of forcing submission. Whatever the reasons, a lot of people were not ready or willing to face the drastic changes that would occur if Jesus were declared King and set over the affairs of the nation. There was a lot of resistance, especially from the leaders who would be deposed, or at least set under the authority of Jesus. That of course includes all of us. We are all deposed if we let Jesus into our lives: We cannot eat what we want, drink what we want, sleep where we want, spend or save our money like we want, use our lives like we want. To be sure, we eventually discover that the New WAY has us doing all these things more like we always dreamed we could do and truly wanted to do, but that does not help on the way in.

The leaders and structures of the nation of Israel increasingly saw Jesus as a threat to their positions and their way of life. And indeed He was! Jesus was a threat to Israel’s whole way of life. Legitimate human structures do not kill people unless they become a terrible threat. Jesus is a threat to every human’s way of life. What is the fastest way to “kill” Jesus today, on the individual level? Ignore Him. All of us spend considerable energy making sure Jesus doesn’t get any greater influence in our lives. He is prominent enough in our history and culture that we have to take deliberate steps to stop Him from getting any closer. We find

many subtle and not-so-subtle ways to do that – everything from ridicule to just acting too busy. Too busy to have time for the Son of God?! Can you believe we actually believe our excuses? Talk about denial! Some of us have even learned to study and write books and sermons about Jesus as a way to ignore Him. God keeps trying to love us, but, convinced that this will mess up our lives too much, we turn a cold shoulder.

Nevertheless, on Palm Sunday, Jesus was through fooling around. He was not going to leave any more doubt in anybody's mind. Some would accept and some would reject, but Jesus declared His own true identity in no uncertain terms. He came into Jerusalem in regal procession, in the prophetic manner, as the Messiah and Rightful King of Israel. What He was doing was crystal clear to everybody there, whether they loved it or hated it. He was acting like the King. He was claiming to be the King. He was telling all Jerusalem (which at Passover time was all Israel) that Messiah had arrived and it was therefore right, necessary, and essential to proceed with the coronation.

Yes, friends: Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday declaring, "I am the true King, and I want the crown – NOW!" Jesus had closed down all other options. He was ready to take over the leadership of the nation. If the authorities allowed Jesus to keep His stance through Passover, it would happen. Jesus forced the issue. It is important to know that. They had to coronate Him or kill Him. There was no other choice.

The story is familiar. I know you know it well. With Palm Sunday, these many years later, it is still possible to know the parts and not add it up. On top of that, some people are still trying to tell us that Jesus' followers made up His identity after He was dead – that Jesus never made any strong statements about His own special identity. That is ludicrous. Let's add it up again:

1.) Jesus prearranges and stages this Palm Sunday scene on purpose. He has worked on it carefully for a long time. He sends His followers into every town and village in Palestine to tell people to meet Him in Jerusalem at Passover for this event. He carefully avoids arrest, managing somehow to elude the authorities all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

2.) He has prearranged the use of an ass's colt. He could not go get it Himself in broad daylight without the crowds of supporters around; He

would have been arrested. So He sends friends to get the colt. The pre-arranged password is *“The Lord has need of it.”* (Matthew 21:3; Mark 11:3; Luke 19:31)

The ass’s colt is a powerful symbol. All Israel knows its significance. It comes from a prophecy in the Book of Zechariah (9:9 RSV): *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.”* Jesus is fulfilling this prophecy in broad daylight, and on purpose, and as the Passover crowds are gathering from all over the known world.

3.) The crowds on Palm Sunday know exactly what Jesus is doing – what He is acting out, what He is proclaiming. This is no accidental uproar. They are enacting the prophecy with Him – quoting and claiming the meaning of the 118th Psalm. That is, they are making a formal procession to the temple, with the King. The temple is, among other things, the place where you coronate the King. Psalm 118 (NJB) reads in part as follows: *“Please, Yahweh, please save us! [That phrase, translated back into Hebrew, sounds something like this: HOSANNA!] Please, Yahweh, please give us prosperity. Blessings on him who comes in the name of Yahweh! We bless you from the house of Yahweh. Yahweh is God, he smiles on us. With branches in your hands, draw up in procession as far as the horns of the altar. You are my God, I give you thanks, I extol you, my God; I give you thanks for having heard me, you have been my savior. Give thanks to Yahweh, for he is good, his love is everlasting!”*

4.) So they line Jesus’ path with their garments, as symbol of welcome *and submission* (obedience) – the willing acceptance of His Kingship. They throw palm branches also, symbol of royalty and the celebration of victory. They come in full procession down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, in through the Golden Gate, and straight into the temple area. There is no doubt or confusion in the scene at this point. They are welcoming a victorious King into Jerusalem, and declaring that this King is the long-awaited Messiah.

5.) Their procession goes straight to the temple courtyard. Once there, Jesus purifies the temple area by throwing out the money-changers. It is an act of authority – the authority of a King (who is also a new High Priest): *“I am in charge here – clean this place up!”* By the way, Jesus does not object to the fact that money-changers are there; having money-changers

at the temple is helpful. His objection is to the fact that they are cheating the people.

People ask: “How did Jesus get away with it? Why did the money-changers leave? Why didn’t the temple police arrest Him right there for disturbing the peace?” Jesus walks in, bangs on the table with His riding crop, and says, “*It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer. You have made it into a cave of thieves. Get out!*” (Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46) So you are one of the money-changers, what do you do? Do you say, “Go away and don’t bother us”? Are you going to call the guard? What about the few thousand wildly enthusiastic followers who have come streaming in right behind Jesus, and who now stretch out through the gates as far back as you can see? I think you would decide to leave. Fifteen or twenty temple police are not going to take on such a crowd. (Some miracles are easier than others.)

The point: Jesus is claiming His authority and right to rule.

6.) The existing authorities – Herod, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin – do not accept His claim, of course. But Jesus has assumed His new role and He will not let it rest. He is back at the temple every day, with His followers, acting like the new King. The temple, remember, is the political as well as religious headquarters of the nation. Jesus is acting like the King, and His followers are declaring Him the new and Rightful King. All Jerusalem is buzzing with excitement. The Chief Priests want to know by what authority Jesus is acting in this outlandish manner: “*Who gives you the authority to act like our King?*” Jesus says, in effect: “God does, but you will not accept it.” (Matthew 21:23ff; Mark 11:28ff; Luke 20:2ff)

The tension and the confrontation with the authorities mount daily. Jesus pushes them to the wall. He will be coronated ... or killed. He will have it no other way. He leaves them with no other choice.

As well as being a historical event, Palm Sunday has become a classic theme in Western lore and literature: The Usurpers take over the throne and rule without wisdom or vision or compassion – rule for their own self-interest. The Rightful King is hidden or unknown, but the Rightful King has true wisdom and real love for his people. Life is hard, and getting worse, for the people. They dream and long for the day when the Rightful King will appear and set things right. One day the Rightful King comes

onto the scene in disguise. The Usurpers are always watching, hoping to discover and kill the Rightful King before he can regain the throne.

In the stories of the Greeks, in fairy tales, in the legends of King Arthur and King Richard the Lion-Hearted, Palm Sunday is reenacted, usually with a happy ending. In real life, it is seldom so. People are still afraid of existing authority. Their support is weakened and scattered. They get talked out of, or tricked out of, allegiance to the true King ... until He is disposed of, and life goes back to its dreary round.

For most of us, I would assume, the most fascinating dimension to Palm Sunday is wondering what would have happened if Jesus had been coronated instead of killed. What would have happened if everyone in Israel had joined the triumphal procession, crowned Jesus King, and then declared themselves ready, willing, and available to be His loyal subjects? What sort of transformation would have taken place in the affairs of the nation if Jesus had become the undisputed King? I keep hoping somebody will write an imaginative story for us. Start out with chapter nineteen, verse forty-one, and tell the story like it might have been – like it should have happened. “Ten Years After Palm Sunday – A New Nation” you could call it. Is anybody listening?

But you don't have to write a book, you can join a church. The church, you see, exists and is dedicated to living out Palm Sunday like it should have happened. In the church, people gather to swear allegiance to the true King, and to live with Him and for Him no matter what the world decides about Him.

In each new generation, Jesus waits to be crowned or killed. With every person born into our world, Jesus still waits to be crowned or killed. “*Hosanna!*” is still a cry we can shout, and mean – or fail to shout, and never truly mean. It can still mean life under His rulership and placed at His disposal. There is nothing this world can do to prevent it, if we decide to give our allegiance to Him. That is the reason we go on remembering Palm Sunday. The event is still open. It is a day still waiting to happen. There are people in the world who will cry “*Hosanna!*” today for the first time, and mean it. And for them, Palm Sunday will be true – and will be their truth for the rest of their lives. Jesus is King!

A whole nation could do it too, of course. The possibility is there – the option is still open. And in truth, the chaos will continue here – the

CORONATION DAY

Usurpers will continue to rule and make things miserable for all of us – *until* that happens. Until that happens, we and our brothers and sisters everywhere will go on living in an alienated world that doesn't know its Rightful King or its own true destiny or potential – until we get the story straight and do Palm Sunday right. Jesus did it right. We do not need a “Second Coming” – WE are the ones who have not done it right yet. But the option is open at any time. Jesus has seen to that. Palm Sunday is still a day waiting to happen.

In any case, on Palm Sunday many years ago, Jesus stopped fooling around. He came out from behind all the hints and parables and innuendo. He declared His true identity. He proclaimed it in the clearest, most dramatic way possible: “I am the long-expected One ... the Messiah ... your True and Rightful King ... the One sent from Heaven to lead you into prosperity and peace and the fullness of God's plan – into a Kingdom that has no end. I am the ONE you prayed for – receive me and crown me your King.”

Coronation or Crucifixion: claim Him or kill Him. Sooner or later, we come to see that He leaves us with no other choice.

PRAYER

We have not always given You our full allegiance, Great Lord. Therefore the earth remains in chaos. The people drift from pleasure to pleasure ... and then from pain to sorrow to grim endurance. The earth withers, and troubles increase.

We do not always give You our full allegiance, Great Lord. The price to us – to all our kind – is beyond counting.

In symbol and celebration, we come again today to reconsider our choice. To decide again if we would rather do life our way – or Your WAY.

Have mercy upon us, O Lord. Make our choices more than symbol and celebration. In your name we pray. Amen.