

Hail, King of the Jews!

Friends,

As we hear the account of Holy Week, we have to say, something's wrong here. On Sunday, the crowds shout "**Hosanna!**" and "**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**" On Friday, there are crowds in the same city shouting "Crucify him!" Now, some people may suggest that Jesus was a polarizing figure, and these were different crowds—Palm Sunday it was his supporters, Good Friday his enemies. Sort of like a modern politician; a national politician might run into very different welcomes from a group of Democrats than he would from the local Republican party.

But that wasn't what was happening on Holy Week. This was not simply people with different views. On Palm Sunday, everything seemed to be right. Jesus, who had shown his love for all and proven his divinity by his miracles and preaching forgiveness, was acclaimed as King by crowds who recognized him for who he was. "**Hosanna to the Son of David**"—that means they knew Jesus was the rightful heir of great King David. Palm Sunday is how it should be. But on Good Friday, everything seems to be wrong.

And yet, even in the midst of the greatest injustice in history, we still have people announcing who Jesus is. They may not have known what they were saying; they may not have meant it. But throughout his Passion Jesus is proclaimed King. Even his enemies announced it: "**Hail, King of the Jews!**"

What do you think of when you hear the word, "King"? Even though we don't have a king in our country, most all Americans get the idea. A king is someone who is powerful. A king can order his servants, and his army, to do what he wants. A king is rich—he can buy whatever he wants. A king is someone to be feared.

In the Bible there are four Gospels, or histories of Jesus' life on earth. Matthew's Gospel especially focuses on Jesus as the King promised from ancient times, the King of God's people. The early part of the Gospel shows Jesus establishing his kingdom in the hearts of his people, by healing and by his preaching. Jesus showed amazing love so we would trust him. The last part of the Gospel shows Jesus establishing the basis for his rule, by going to the cross to be our Savior.

Recalling all that Jesus did throughout Israel, it's no wonder the crowds turned out that Sunday to welcome Jesus. When some didn't recognize him, the crowds simply said, "**This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth.**"

But this wasn't the reception Jesus later received in the high places of Jerusalem. Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest, had been plotting for a while as to how to get rid of Jesus. He was jealous of the adulation of the crowds. But he also opposed Jesus for his message. Jesus kept preaching about peace—but it was not the peace a king might create with his army; it was the peace an individual has with God. It was not the peace the religious leaders preached—a peace that came as you did what they said, a peace that kept them in control; it was a peace based solely on God's love.

So Caiaphas conspired to get rid of this prophet from Nazareth. His men paid off Judas to betray Jesus. His servants accompanied the Roman soldiers as Jesus was arrested. Caiaphas

gathered the court and the crowd to shout for Jesus' death. And this same man, Joseph Caiaphas, was also the judge at Jesus' trial.

They tried to pay false witnesses to testify against Jesus; but the traitors couldn't get their stories straight. Finally Caiaphas asked Jesus, "**Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?**" And Jesus said, Yes, **it is as you say...And the day would come when Caiaphas would see him sitting at the right hand of the Father and then coming down on the clouds of heaven.**

You see, Jesus is the King of the universe. But his kingdom is hidden. It is a kingdom where he rules in people's hearts. But the day is coming when his kingdom will be visible. When Jesus returns on Judgment Day every eye will see him, and all people, even Joseph Caiaphas, will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Remember that in the days and weeks to come. As we see more and more people dying even in our country and the economy is stagnant and people are despairing, remember that Jesus Christ is Lord and King. Even in the worst of times, he will rule in our hearts, assuring us again and again of his love. The same Jesus who healed the sick and raised the dead is watching over us. We may not see his kingdom yet with our eyes, but the day is coming when we will. Until then, we can trust him, because of what he did on this earth, especially on that Thursday night into Friday.

Caiaphas said that Jesus was worthy of death. But with the Romans in control of Palestine, the Jews did not have the right to execute someone. So they turned Jesus over to the Roman Governor, Pilate.

Pilate is such an interesting character in the story. He clearly was stumped by Jesus. He likely had heard about this preacher and miracle-worker, a man who seemed to pose no threat. Jesus obviously was not a king. Kings have bodyguards and armies and money and power; this man had nothing. But the Jewish leaders insisted that he was a rebel.

Yet, when questioned, Jesus refused to defend himself. Pilate asked a simple question: "**Are you the king of the Jews?**" We might think of that as a "softball" question. Jesus should say, "No, I'm no king," and Pilate would send him off—Don't waste my time with this poor beggar. But Jesus again said, "**You have said so**"—in other words, Yes, Jesus was the king.

Pilate tried to get the crowd to help him out. Did they want Barabbas, a murderer, a real threat, set free, or this Jesus, the helpless teacher? But the crowds, stirred up by the chief priests, called for Jesus to be crucified. Finally Pilate washed his hands of the matter and sent Jesus to his cross.

The soldiers played up the "king" joke. After beating him, they put a scarlet robe over him, a staff in his hand, a crown on his head—a crown of thorns—and knelt and mocked him. And spoke the words that were so true: "**Hail, King of the Jews!**"

At the cross, the written notice of his crime read, "**The King of the Jews.**" And the chief priests, who had not had enough fun, came out to Golgotha to mock him, shouting that this king of Israel should come down from his cross—then they'd believe in him.

What a sad sight the poor man dying on a cross was. What kind of king was this?

Yet it is precisely in this humiliation that Jesus established his kingdom. Jesus was not a king as Pilate or the chief priests understood. His kingdom would not have walls and armies and a treasury—not in this world. His kingdom was one of peace. Jesus would not establish his

kingdom by killing his enemies but by shedding his own blood. Instead of punishing, his kingdom was about forgiving.

This is clear as he hung on the cross. As his death was imminent, Jesus cried out, **“My God, why have you forsaken me?”** This wasn’t just Jesus imagining things. God the Father had abandoned Jesus, because Jesus was carrying the sins of the world.

Matthew notes that when Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. This curtain had separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the world. Only the high priest entered that area, only one time a year, to bring the blood of sacrifice for sins. Well, when Jesus died, that sacrifice was completed. Sin, all sin, was paid for. Everything you have ever done wrong was forgiven.

And this is how Jesus established his kingdom. Jesus came to establish the peace of God for all people, a peace that comes through the uncontrollable grace of God. In his death on the cross, we see just what kind of King Jesus came to be.

Matthew tells us that God gave one more glimpse of Jesus’ kingdom. There was an earthquake, and tombs broke open, and the bodies of believers were raised to life; and on Sunday, after Jesus rose from the dead, these believers came into Jerusalem and were widely seen.

This is the kingdom we look forward to. On Judgment Day, all the dead will be raised to life. Those who trusted in Jesus will be welcomed into a new home in heaven. Remember that when you read the death tolls these weeks. Covid-19 may kill many people; other illnesses will kill so many more. But all of us who trust in Jesus will live beyond our graves; we will live in his eternal kingdom.

That’s why we can join with the Palm Sunday crowds in shouting “Hosanna”—“Save us, Lord.” And that is why we can say, as was so often affirmed on that Holy Week, “Hail, King of the Jews.” Amen.