

Blessed Is the King Who Comes

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Throughout the month of November, as the former church year was coming to its end, we turned our attention to what are called the last things: themes like the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the condemnation and sending away of the wicked, and eternal life in the new creation for the faithful – all those things for which we wait and know will happen when amid the closing thunders of this age Christ our Lord comes again in great glory and might.

But now as we begin a new church year, we step back to contemplate his first coming. That coming was promised to our original parents already in Eden when they fell into sin, and then was further foretold being elaborated and explained by the prophets down through the centuries, and then was finally fulfilled some two thousand years ago. *That* he came, is a given. In light of this morning's Gospel, I'd like to focus on *how* he came.

We see first that he came in humility. Picture the scene: here he is, Israel's long hoped for and eagerly desired Messiah, the heir to the throne of David—not to mention God the Son, King of kings and Lord of lords; but he comes into Zion, the city of God, not as kingly conquering hero, but as an itinerant religious teacher from some no place in far-flung Galilee. He has no palace, no army, no banners, no courtiers, no fine chariot in which to ride; he owns little more than the clothing he is wearing – peasant's clothes, not royal finery. And precisely because he comes in such humility, he is not recognized for who and what he is by the vast majority of those who are expecting the Messiah to appear. He is especially not recognized by religious establishment, its leaders and scholars. No, his following, such as it is, is derived largely of the unwashed masses: the poor, the needy, those lacking much in the way of formal education. And though he teaches his followers to be humble as he is humble, they are not. They selfishly dream of glory and the high roles they imagine they will occupy in his kingdom when he establishes it on this earth.

The King came also in need. It's something of an oxymoron. Jesus sends two of his disciples to pick up the borrowed transportation he will use for his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. If anyone asks why they are untying the donkey colt, he instructs them to say, "The Lord has need of it". That should strike us because in an absolute sense the Lord has no needs. He created all things. He gives all things. He *needs* nothing. And Jesus has the divine power to whip up out of nothing a donkey of his very own. And yet for our sake he denied himself his divine power – he emptied himself of it – so that he could live a life with all our human needs; not just for a donkey to fulfill the prophecy by Zechariah, but every need of humanity: for a mother to give him birth, for nourishment and clothing, for parents to protect and raise him, for teaching him to walk and talk and read and write. He needed people to open their homes to shelter him during his ministry, since he had no home of his own. He needed them to support him with food and drink – he lived off of their gifts. Though he created and owns all things, yet for us he made himself poor and needy.

The King came in mercy. He is known and sharply criticized for being a "friend of sinners". Among his followers are some of the worst sorts: tax collectors, former prostitutes, people guilty of adultery, theft, and just about any other crime you can name. But, as he says, it's the sick who need a doctor, not those who are well (or imagine themselves to be so). And for those who know that they are sick and dying in sin, he has no words of condemnation.

Instead he heals; he grants pardon. In mercy he gives rest to the weary and comfort to the doubting soul.

The King came in peace. Angels proclaimed it at his birth, and nearing the end of his ministry the crowd echoes their refrain: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" This is his messianic mission: to make everlasting peace between the holy God and rebellious mankind. He will make this peace with his own body when he offers it up on the cross. There he will bear the penalty of the world's sins: the agony, the shame and disgrace, the separation from God and all that is good that we so richly deserve. When he bows his head in death he will announce the end of the war: "It is finished". And on the third day when he appears to his disciples, his first words to them will be "Peace to you".

And finally, the King came in righteousness. Though tempted in every way that we are, during his life on this earth the Son completely fulfilled his Father's good and loving will. He kept the Law whole and undefiled in order that he could present himself the perfect sacrifice: The Lamb of God without spot or blemish who takes away the sin of the world.

That is *how* he came to the people of God on that first Palm Sunday nearly twenty centuries ago. What I'd have you see this morning is that he still does come to the faithful – and in exactly the same ways.

The King comes to us in humility. He appears not in splendor and glory, a sight to inspire awe. Rather he comes to us in his Word in which we hear his voice speaking through the mouths of others. And through his Word he enters our ears and makes his home with us. He who is the Word of God, writes himself on our hearts. He further comes to the faithful in visible ways in the Sacraments, veiling himself in humble elements: a handful of water, a morsel of bread, a sip of wine. The faithful see him coming in humility; but like at his first coming, precisely because he comes in humility, he is not recognized by many. In their pride they would like to see signs and wonders, manifestations of divine power. But he comes in humility to call his followers to be humble, to confess their pride and to receive him with the faith as of a child.

The King comes to us in need. That's another place he locates himself: in the needs of his people. He says so himself: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me" and so on. When asked, "When did we see you [in these conditions]?" he replies, "As you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

The King comes to us in mercy, calling sinners to repent and to receive the forgiveness of sins that he bought and paid for with his precious blood. With his Word of absolution he binds the broken-hearted and sets the captive free. Through his Word he gives strength to the weary, sight to the spiritually blind, hearing to the spiritually deaf, and life to the spiritually dead.

The King comes to us in peace. As he appeared to his disciples in his crucified and risen body to declare peace with God, he appears now to us in his body and blood to grant us the peace he made for us in his flesh. And we too join the crowd in singing Hosannas to the Son of David, and in saying, "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, grant us your peace." He does grant it: the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

And lastly the King comes to us in righteousness. It's the other half of the great exchange: not only does he come to take away and cleanse us from all sin, but also to be our righteousness in the sight of God. He covers us with his sinless perfection so that when God

looks at us, that's what he sees. And thus the words spoken through the prophet Jeremiah are fulfilled: The Lord is our righteousness.

As he came once, so he comes to us now: in humility, in need, in mercy, in peace, and in righteousness. And it's vital that we receive him as he comes to us now, for the day is approaching when he will come again, this time in a very different way.

The King will not come in humility, but rather in great glory and might. The dead will be raised and every eye shall see him, and every knee go down in reverential awe. No one will fail to recognize him – for better or for worse.

The King will not come in need, but in abundant blessing for the faithful who will inherit the new heaven and earth. Need will be something that they never know again: no sorrows, no losses, no illness or pain. The King will wipe away all of the tears of those who eagerly await his return.

The King will not come in mercy, but in judgment for sinners who rejected his call to repentance and to receive his forgiveness. The day of grace and mercy will be over.

The King will not come in peace, but in warring wrath for unbelievers who lived their lives in rebellion against him, who allied themselves with Satan and whose sins still cling to them. They will be overthrown and sent away to the place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

And finally, in the one way of his coming that remains the same, the King will come in righteousness. The ways of the Lord are just. All mankind will acknowledge that his judgments are right and true – even those who stand condemned before him. They will confess that they are without excuse.

This is why it's incumbent upon us to confess our sins and unworthiness now while it is still the day of grace, and to continue to receive the King as he comes to us in the present. This is how he keeps us in the true faith and prepares us to receive him when he does come again in glory. Then for us it will be a day not of fear and trembling, but of great joy. And we will once again join the faithful in praising our Savior and saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!