

Behold the King

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Throughout the month of November as we were winding down the end of the last church year, we spent our time together on matters concerning the End Times; such topics as the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and life everlasting. The central event in all of that is the Last Day itself, when Christ our Lord will return to this earth visibly, coming in the clouds with glory and great power. For some it will be a day of terror and woe, of wrath and retribution. For others it will be a day of boundless joy and celebration. Every eye, we are told, will behold him. Everyone will be looking at the same Jesus; but not everyone will see him the same way. For some he will appear as the Righteous Judge, the dreadful Executor of God's justice. For others he will appear as the Deliverer from bondage and the gentle Shepherd to lead them home. It will be the same Jesus; but there will be two completely different ways of looking at him.

How you or I or anyone else will see him then depends entirely on how we see him as he came two thousand years ago, and indeed, how we see him as he comes to us right now, since they are in many ways the same. So let's do that. Let's turn back the clock to the year AD 30 or so when the action in this morning's Gospel takes place. It's the day we call Palm Sunday, when Jesus came to the city of Jerusalem near the very end of his public ministry. Placing ourselves in the crowd, let's see Jesus as people there did. Let's behold the King as he comes.

What are we going to notice about him first, do you suppose? What is it you're going to see? Answer: not much. And that's going to be rather disappointing. I mean here you are living in Jerusalem. You've heard all these wonderful stories about how the one called the Messiah has come. He's supposed to be the heir to David's throne, the one whom the prophets foretold would rescue Israel from her bondage. You've heard of his miracles and his powerful teaching. Then you heard reports that said he's on the way – that's he's coming here to the holy city today. So now you're on the street, and you hear the hubbub and the shouting and singing as he approaches. His followers are hailing him as King. You want to see this. You're waiting eagerly in the pressing crowd. You're bobbing your head this way and that trying to get a glimpse of him. You're being shoved around on all sides. Then there's a parade of people waving palm branches in the way, so it's hard to see anything very well. And now at last you *can* see him; but you don't realize it at first. The guy next to you says, "There! There he is! I saw him a year ago up in Galilee." You respond, "Yeah? Where? I don't see him. Is he behind that guy on the donkey?" "No, you knucklehead", he says, "He *is* the guy on the donkey!" Your jaw drops. You look at him in disbelief and say, "You've *got* to be kidding! *That's* him? No way! He doesn't look anything like a king. There's nothing special about him at all. How could *anyone* even begin to think that *he* might be the Messiah?"

This is the point: Jesus doesn't appear as we would expect. There's nothing spectacular about him at all, nothing that makes him stand out. He looks pretty much like everyone else. If anything, he's *less* noticeable. His face is not particularly handsome or memorable. His clothes are those of a Galilean peasant. He sits astride a lowly beast of burden like a common trader. Everything about him is mundane and ordinary and understated. And yet, knowing what we do looking back at this episode, we realize that he is the very Lord of glory and the Creator and King of the whole universe. But all of that is veiled as he comes. None of that is what we see.

So let's ask what else we *can* see. If we back up a bit to before the procession of palms began, we'll see him outside the city telling two of his disciples to go fetch the donkey for him. What he says to them should strike us as odd, to say the least. "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'" There's an oxymoron if ever there was one. How can the Lord have needs? Understand that when Jesus speaks of the Lord, he's talking about the Lord God Almighty, who, by definition, has no needs. He's way above and beyond all that. Yet in these simple words that we might have overlooked if we weren't looking closely are revealed the mystery of the incarnation. In Jesus God the Son took on human flesh and blood, and when he did he took on all human needs. He needed to eat and drink and bathe and sleep and walk (or ride) from place to place if he wanted to get around. Under normal circumstances it would be silly to speak of God in such terms, and yet in the person of Jesus it's true. In him the Lord took on our limitations. He took on our weaknesses. And so we see in Jesus the Lord God by his own choice *dependent* upon others, subject to the good will and charity of his fellow man. And if we wait around until the end of the week, we'll see him subject to the evil will of his fellow man.

This is all quite unexpected. It's not what we thought we would see. But for the moment let's go back to his triumphant entry into the city and ask, "What else do we see?" First century Jews hoped and dreamed that the Messiah, when he came, would be a mighty warrior, a conquering hero who would lead vast armies of their countrymen in victory upon victory over the hated Romans who occupied their land. This Jesus doesn't look anything like that. He's no soldier. He's leading no army. There are no battle flags. He carries no weapons. He's wearing no armor or helmet. No, his coming is gentle. There's no use of force in his approach, not even the threat of it. He's not ordering people to submit to him. Nor is he speaking against the Roman occupation. In fact, later this week, he'll tell his astonished hearers that they ought to submit to their conquerors and willingly pay taxes to Caesar. So what we see in Jesus is the Lord God exercising incredible restraint. Though his own arm is almighty in power and he commands countless legions of angels, he's not using them. He could easily destroy his foes and force his authority upon the people, ruling over them with a rod of iron; but he doesn't do that. Instead, we see that he's armed only with his Word of truth. Instead of inspiring his followers to rise up and rebel and conquer evil by force, he speaks a simple message of love and forgiveness and submission and service for others.

On account of that, we see that he comes in a way that can be rejected. That's what we see in his interaction with the Pharisees. They too are looking for a messiah. Specifically, they expect to see a messiah who will appreciate their sincere desire and effort to be good people, wholly devoted to keeping God's commandments. They expect to see a messiah who will praise them for their devotion and reward them accordingly. Or say it another way, they expect to see a messiah who will reinforce their high opinion of themselves and give them glory. But that's something they've never seen in Jesus. Quite the contrary, what they've seen in Jesus is a friend of sinners. They've seen a fellow who calls upon all people – even them – to repent. In fact, Jesus has reserved some of his sharpest criticisms for them – the most outwardly godly and religious of all people. And so in Jesus, they don't see what they want. And for that reason they reject him. As will just about everyone else before this week is ended, because no one will be seeing in Jesus what they want or expect.

But that's the way he comes. That's the only way he allows himself to be seen: in humility, in weakness, in need, in submission, without the use of force, armed only with his Word of truth, and by it calling sinners to repentance and to faith in him. And he'll be seen in these ways until the very end when, on Good Friday, he is seen gaining the victory by surrendering himself to his foes, leading by serving, attaining glory through humiliation, gaining

honor through shame, and achieving life for all by dying. There he appears as the friend of sinners when he prays for his enemies and assures a dying thief who trusts in him of eternal life in his kingdom. There on the cross crowned with thorns we behold the King.

And that's how we poor dying sinners must continue to see him even today if at his second coming we too want to see him turn a kind face to us and say, "Today *you* will be with me in Paradise. Come, enter into the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world."

Because this is true, because this is how he wants to be seen, this is how he continues to show himself to us. How? In the same ways he appeared back then: not as we might expect in glitz and glamour and glory and power; but in simple and mundane things, his true glory and might concealed to the naked eye.

Today he reveals himself in his Word. That's where we see and hear him as he speaks to us through stories and prophecies thousands of years old, and through the mouths of very ordinary looking pastors and teachers like me. (Well, some of us are a tad better looking than others.) No, seriously, he speaks and shows himself through people who are weak and sinful and are subject to ailments, temptations, and failings of all kinds; but the message is the same. We preach Christ crucified. We hold up the cross and the Lord of glory nailed to it because that's where and how Jesus wants you to see him. There in what is foolishness to the world is the wisdom and power of God for your salvation. There you behold the King.

And to further help you see him there, he shows himself to you in other very ordinary things. In a few handfuls of water, for example, he takes a hold of you in Baptism, he unites himself to you, burying you with him in his death so that he can raise you with him to a new and godly life. And then we have his Supper, by which, in a morsel of bread and a sip of wine he gives you his own body and blood sacrificed on the cross for you. He does this so that he can feed your faith in what is not seen by your partaking of what you can see of him, and also so that you, by your eating and drinking, can proclaim his death in your life until he comes. Again, the focus is always on his cross. *There* you behold the King.

But there are other kinds of crosses in this world. Wherever there is pain or suffering or want or need of any kind, especially when it is being borne by a child of God, there too is a cross that Christ bears. That's what he will say to the sheep on his right hand: "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was sick and in prison ... and when you came to the aid of the least of these my brothers, you were serving me." So when you see a fellow believer in distress carrying a cross of some kind, there you behold the King; and there you have an opportunity to serve him.

Or you can choose not to. As a matter of fact, because he appears in the ways that I've mentioned, namely in the simple, unattractive, and unappealing, you can choose not to see him at all. He's not using force, remember. Rather, he's chosen to appear for the time being in ways that can be rejected. So you can, if you like, turn your back on him. Because he isn't appearing in ways that you might prefer, say in ways that appeal to you more, or that inspire you, or that live up to your hopes and expectations, or that make you happy and successful in this life, or that let you keep your pride intact, well, then you can choose not to see him. Just some words from an old book. Just a handful of water. Just some bread and wine. Just somebody in trouble. *Just some guy on a donkey*. But how you see him now makes all the difference in how you will see him when he comes again in glory.

So, how do you see him? Or maybe a better question is how have you been seeing him? If you're like me, the answer is not very well. We're all guilty of being negligent with his Word, careless and inattentive with his Sacraments, and of turning away from our brothers and sisters in need. For these sins we deserve nothing but his swift and terrible judgment. But fortunately for us he comes in these humble and gentle ways not to destroy his enemies and sweep us away. Instead, by these means of appearing, he comes to call sinners to repentance and to life through faith in him. He comes calling upon us to trust in what is not seen and what is yet to be revealed. He comes in love and forgiveness, serving us by giving himself on the cross; and giving us opportunities to exercise our love and trust by serving him through helping our brothers and sisters in need.

Therefore, since we know where to find him and exactly how to see him, with repentant hearts let's make it a point to behold the King as he reveals himself to us in time while his glory is veiled, so that we may rejoice forever with him when he comes with his glory fully revealed. God grant it to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!