

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 into 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. That is the way ancient people often told the story, but that has never been *God’s* way. Because it is not God’s way, some people conclude that there is no God. Interesting logic, isn’t it? If we are not pugnacious, unreasonable, aggressive, demanding, and determined to have our own way in all things and at all times, then we do not exist. I know some humans who are that way. My experience with God has never been that way.

All of our authentic dealings with God suggest that God wants a relationship with us far more than we want a relationship with God. Only, it is not a relationship between equals. So God is patient, subtle, gentle, forgiving – “long-suffering,” the Old Testament says again and again. God wants us to “get it”: to comprehend God’s 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.

All of our ancient traditions say that we never see God “face-to-face.” The “glory” would overwhelm us and take away our free will. We could no longer learn or grow or come into the relationship authentically. God awakens us and reveals things to us continually – at least as much as we can handle, considering how much

we have learned to trust God so far. But it is never even close to the full picture. Where do we think we are?! Do we still have some measure of humility?

Many people prefer to go on with their lives in their own way until God *makes* them behave. Have you ever watched little children? And some of us are waiting – waiting until God *makes* us believe. But that will never 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.

In Jesus’ story, by the time we reach Palm Sunday, the evidence was overwhelming for anybody who was paying attention – 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 there was one big wrinkle: People also assumed that the Messiah would use military might. They assumed that the Messiah would be a great warrior, like his ancestor David. They assumed that the Messiah would smash anybody who got in the way or disagreed with his leadership. Jesus’ failure to do this smashing and destroying is why Judaism does not believe in Him to this day. It is why many “Christians” do not fully believe in Him yet either. Over half of Christendom is still waiting for Jesus to COME AGAIN – to return and do this smashing and destroying, because Jesus did not do it right the first time. Jesus did not do it “our way”: Time to get over all this mercy and forgiveness crap, and get on with it. Take all the good guys into Heaven and throw all the bad guys into Hell – and get on with it! That is how we think, but that is never how God thinks.

Palm Sunday is absolutely essential to the story; we cannot understand the rest if we skip over it. But have you noticed that more and more, churches are starting to skip over Palm Sunday? They think there is not enough to say – not enough message to Palm Sunday – so now we are calling it “Passion Sunday,” even in official church calendars. Wave a couple of palms if you like, but let’s get on into Holy Week and to things that really matter.

If Jesus is God's Messiah, then Jesus *did* do it right. Jesus rejected the smashing-and-destroying approach as unusable for His purposes. God wants the relationship, and you cannot get that by physical force. How many abusive husbands do you know who win more and more love from their wives? Why does so much of Christendom still want God to be like an abusive husband? They picture God that way, and they tell everybody that is what God is like.

God works to convince, to change – from within. God builds on growth, learning, comprehension, awakening. If we are waiting for blood in the streets before joining God's Kingdom, we will wait a very long time. Indeed, some of us have been. But we cannot outwait God. And the only blood the Messiah is willing to shed is His own. God is never going to beat up the people we do not like. God is never going to force any of us to be good. God is never going to stop any of us from doing evil. It is a bitter pill to swallow – unless, of course, God is being patient and merciful to *us* as well. But who likes to think about that side of things?

In any case, lots of people were waiting for the Messiah to come, but nobody was waiting for *God's* Messiah. We were waiting for a Messiah according to our own ideas of what the Messiah should be like, how the Messiah should behave, and what the Messiah should do. In other words, not many people were ready for the Messiah who came. We 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' very different understanding of the precepts and principles of God's Kingdom. That, of course, includes us all. 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 us very much 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 does not 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 that we actually believe our excuses? Talk about denial!

And not all of us, but many of us play endless games with our spiritual disciplines. We move earnestly toward tithing to our church for twenty-five years, and never get any closer. How many of us have more allegiance toward watching a ball game than we do toward worshipping with our faith family? 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 find endless ways to ignore God.

You may think I am trying to make you feel guilty, but I know better than most that guilt cannot help us. Awareness sometimes helps, but guilt only cuts our energy. Love and gratitude can help us. Grace and forgiveness can help us. Guilt and shame always betray us into Satan's hands. However, letting go of our excuses and looking at our lives as they really are *can* still lead to repentance. And repentance can take us straight into the arms of the Holy Spirit.

Back to it: 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 He was the Messiah, that the Messiah had arrived, and that it was therefore right, necessary, and essential to proceed with the coronation.

Please do not miss it or minimize it: 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 was a done deal. Jesus forced the issue. It is important to know that. They had to crown Him or kill Him. Jesus left them 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 to the whole. 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 true identity. That is ludicrous. Let's add it up together:

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.) Jesus has prearranged the use of an ass's colt. At this point, He cannot go get it Himself without the probability of being arrested. So He sends friends to get the colt. The prearranged 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: *"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."* (Zechariah 9:9 RSV) Jesus is determined to fulfill this prophecy in broad daylight and on purpose, 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 the King is coronated; there is no separation of church and state in Israel. Psalm 118 reads in part as follows: *"Please, Yahweh, please save us! [That phrase, translated back into Hebrew, sounds like "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!" (Psalm 118:25-29 NJB) Sometimes we think that life is accidental or that things are a coincidence. Palm Sunday is not one of those times. Jesus could not make His proclamation any more clear.

4.) So the people line Jesus' path with their garments, as symbol of welcome *and submission* (obedience) to the King – 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 square. There is no doubt or confusion in the scene at this point. They are welcoming a victorious King into Jerusalem, and they are 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 now High Priest): "I am in charge here – clean this place up!"

By the way, Jesus does not object to the money-changers being there. People traveling to Jerusalem for Passover need an animal to sacrifice on the altar. Many of them need to purchase an animal when they get there; others bring an animal with them but need to exchange it for an animal without blemish. The money-changers are needed. Jesus' objection is that they are cheating the people in the exchanges. They are a "den of robbers."

People ask: "How did Jesus get away with purifying the temple? Why did the money-changers leave? Why didn't the temple police arrest Jesus right then for disturbing the peace?" Jesus walks into the temple square, bangs on the table with his riding crop, and says: "*It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it into a cave of thieves. Get out!*" (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46) If you are one of the money-changers, what do you do? Do you say, "Go away and don't bother us"? Do you call the guard – the temple police? What about the few thousand wildly enthusiastic followers who have come streaming into the temple square 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 a crowd of five thousand supporters. (Some miracles are easier to explain than others.)

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

6.) The existing authorities – Herod, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin – do not accept Jesus’ 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 replies, in effect: “God does, but you will not accept it, any more than you accepted John’s authority.” (Matthew 21:23ff; Mark 11:27ff; Luke 20:1ff)

The tension and the confrontation with the authorities mount daily. Jesus pushes them to the wall. He will be crowned as King, or He will be killed. He will have it no other way. He leaves them with no other choice. Jesus has no other choice either. If you are the Rightful King and you walk away, the destiny closes down. That leaves only one other choice: kill your enemies. Our world *still* thinks using military might (a rebellion, an uprising) is the only choice for a true king. But Jesus chooses a different WAY. It is a very rare thing in our world: to honestly invite people to choose you because they believe in you, and to be willing to suffer the consequences if they do not. This is Jesus’ choice. He chose it then; He chooses it still. “I will be your King if and when you choose me to be your King. Then and only then can you know my Kingdom or know what it is like to have me as your King.”

As well as being a historical event, Palm Sunday has become a classic theme in Western lore and literature ever since. It goes like this: The Usurpers take over the throne, and they rule without wisdom or vision or compassion – they 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.

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In Greek stories, in fairy tales, in the legends of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and King Richard the Lion-Hearted, Palm Sunday is reenacted and retold, usually with a happy ending. In real life, it is seldom so. People are still afraid of existing authority – of life as they have known it. Their support is soon weakened and scattered. They get talked out of or tricked out of allegiance to the true King – until he is deposed or disposed of yet again, and life goes back to its normal 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.

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 around them 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. 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. For them, Palm Sunday will be true, and it will be their truth for the rest of their lives. Jesus is King!

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. 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

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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.