Behold, your king is coming to you
Luke 19:28-40

It's Palm Sunday and the week before Easter, so we're going to take a short break from 1 Peter and look at this event known as Jesus' Triumphal Entry. And as we do, I want us to see three things - firstly, we all want a king - even if you're a small r republican; secondly, what the problem with kings is, and thirdly the king we all need.

The Desire for a King
Look how Luke begins his account, v28, 'He [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.' But Jesus is not alone on the road, and it's not just his immediate group of disciples who are taking the road with him. The feast of Passover's approaching and that meant pilgrims are piling in to Jerusalem. In fact, contemporary historians reckoned that at Passover, Jerusalem's population, which normally counted in the 10s of 1000s, swelled to over a million.

Imagine what that must have been like. Several years back I was in Cardiff, the capital of Wales, to watch Wales play in the Rugby World Cup. And the Welsh love rugby and they love singing. And as kick off time approached, and we walked to the stadium, crowds started appearing from all these side roads, streaming in from the train station and carparks, and the bars and the pubs, and there was this festival atmosphere as Welsh voices filled the air and everyone converged on the stadium for the big match.

And that's the kind of crowd Jesus would have found himself amongst, as the pilgrims made their way to the capital, singing the psalms of ascent, heading not for the game but the great feast - the feast of the year, the feast of their national identity, Passover, and Israel delivered by God from slavery.

And in that crowd were people who knew Jesus. People from Galilee in the north, who had heard his teaching, and seen his miracles. Because when the city became aware that the crowd was even more excited and noisy than normal, even for Passover, and that excitement was centred around someone riding a donkey, Matthew tells us, 'the whole city was stirred up, saying "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."' (Matt 21:10-11).

But not just from Galilee. John tells us that some in the crowd had, just a few days before, witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and that in one of the villages right nearby.

And so there were plenty taking the road who knew Jesus was someone special. So special that earlier in his ministry, as John tells us, people 'were about to come and take him by force to make him king' (John 6:15).

So, when Jesus tells two of his disciples to go get a young donkey and bring it to him, and he gets on that donkey, and starts the descent down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, it's no surprise that the crowd reacts the way it does. As Luke tells us, v37-38, 'The whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "*Blessed is the King* who comes in the name of the Lord!"' And John tells us that the crowd, 'took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, *even the King of Israel*!" (John 12:13). And Matthew says, 'The crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna *to the Son of David*!"' (Matt 21:9).

David, Israel's greatest king. And the crowd are proclaiming Jesus as his Son, the heir to his throne, the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

And he's coming to Jerusalem, David's capital city, to be crowned, and this is his coronation procession! At least, that's their hope, and that's why excitement fills the air.

And it's why they wave palm branches.

You see, since the time of the Maccabees, and the Jewish revolt against Greek rule around 200 years before, the palm branch had become a symbol of the Jewish state, they'd even minted it on their coins. So as they wave those branches, they're waving a symbol of national identity and national pride. It would be like a crowd waving the Stars and Stripes or Union Jack. *Except*, they're an occupied state, living under the power of Rome - so it's more like a crowd waving the French tricolour in Nazi occupied Paris, or the Ukrainian flag in Russian occupied territories. This was a statement: our deliverer, our true king has come.

But other than what they already know of Jesus, what's triggered this? Well, Matthew tells us, and it's to do with the 500 year old prophecy from Zechariah. Matthew 21:4-5, 'This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.'"'

So, at least some saw Jesus deliberately take a donkey, and ride it down into the city, and they're thinking, 'I know what he's doing, I know what he's claiming, and I've seen his miracles and I've heard his teaching, and at last, the king, the Messiah, the one who will deliver us from our enemies, has come.'

And they wanted that to be true, and Zechariah tells us why.

You see, right before he prophesies of a king coming, mounted on a donkey, Zechariah has been describing how God will humble the nations surrounding Israel and break their power and oppression over Israel.

And this crowd knew all about that kind of oppression. They knew what it was to have foreign soldiers watching their every move. They knew what it was to pay excessive taxes to that occupying power, a fact made all the worse by the collaborators, the tax collectors, taking a share for themselves. And they knew what it was to see any attempt at resistance ruthlessly put down, and those who attempted it either killed or sold into slavery.

So, when they see Jesus, son of David, sat on that donkey, heading for David's city, they want it to be true, they want their king to come.

But of course, it's not just them who want a king. We all do. Think of legends and fairy tales - of valiant kings or brave princes who ride to their people's rescue. We used to live in the city of Winchester, the ancient capital of England. And there's a part of Winchester called Sleepers Hill. Because the legend is that King Arthur and his knights are buried under that hill, sleeping, until the day when Britain is in mortal danger, and they'll awake and ride to the rescue. Or think of Aragorn, in Lord of the Rings, 'All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost; The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the ashes a fire shall be

woken, A light from the shadows shall spring; Renewed shall be blade that was broken, The crownless again shall be king.' And something inside us responds to the idea of the heroic, warrior king.

Or take the series *the Crown* - which I have never watched. But judging by the number of times I'm asked what I think of it, and by Americans of all people, there's clearly something about royalty and monarchy that fascinates us.

But not just blood royalty. Think how we make kings and queens out of politicians, or thought leaders, or celebrities and athletes and musicians. And we lift them up, and crown them. Because it's as if, deep down, we need to crown *someone*.[1]

And the Bible tells us why. It tells us we're made to admire and adore and worship, to love and delight in, and if we refuse to crown God, we're going to crown a substitute.

And we long for beauty, so we crown the beautiful. We long for greatness, so we crown the leader who promises to make us great again. We long for victory, so we crown the athlete whose victory can become our victory. We long for wisdom, so we crown the one who seems able to make sense of life and cut through all the noise. We long for glory, so we crown the celebrity, thinking we shine in their reflected light. We long for bravery, so we crown the one who swims against the tide.

And so the people we, or our culture, idolise, and crown, tell us what deep down we're longing for: Someone who's beautiful and great, brave and victorious, wise and glorious. A King. The problem is, none of our substitutes possess all those qualities. Ultimately they let us down. The great become proud. The victorious get beaten. The wise sometimes get it wrong. And the brave believe falsehoods.

The Problem with Kings

And some watching what was going on with this crowd had a major problem with it. As Luke tells us, v39, 'Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples."'

But look how Jesus responds, v40, 'He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."' In other words, even creation, even this physical world is longing for a king. For someone to come and make everything right, to put the world back into sync.

And yet, the Pharisees have a point don't they? They get the problem with kings, or wannabe kings, and how all this nationalistic fervour will be viewed by the Romans. And how this crowd are ascribing things to Jesus that only God is worthy of, and what that says about the crowd and about Christ.

You see, kings don't exactly have a great track record, do they?

And before kings came on the scene in Israel, the nation was led by Judges. But in the face of internal decay and external threats, people demanded a king, a strong man, a *real* leader. It was a move that God said was not so much a rejection of Samuel, the last of the Judges, as of God himself, because they too were wanting a substitute.

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[1] See Keller, Hope in Times of Fear: the Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter, p39-40

So before giving them a king, Samuel warned them of the problem with kings. 1 Samuel 8:11-18, 'He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons… he will take your daughters… he will take the best of your fields and vineyards… he will take the tenth of your grain… He will take your male servants and female servants… he will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, who you have chosen for yourselves."'

In other words, Israel you want a king and you think he's going to solve your problems, but the reality's very different. The very thing you think is going to bring you freedom will enslave you. The thing you think will make you richer will rob you. The thing you think will bring victory will control you. And the thing you think will make you better will corrupt you. And over multiple different cultures, and time periods, Samuel's been proven right, time and time again. So it's no surprise that kings are replaced by democracies.

And yet, someone doesn't have to wear a crown to behave like a king, do they? And if power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, so too can influence. Or beauty. Or fame.

And so what you realise is that the problem doesn't lie with the crown on the head, but the stuff going on in the heart.

But not just with the one who is, or wants to be king, but with those who want a king.

You see, when Saul was chosen as Israel's first king, 1 Samuel 9 tells us he was tall, handsome and wealthy - everything a king, or a leader, should be. And yet he failed the character test. But knowing that didn't stop Samuel, when he was sent by God to anoint Saul's replacement, from defaulting to exactly the same external qualities of stature and strength, and charisma and looks. And God has to say to him, "The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). And instead of the eldest, or tallest, or most handsome, God chooses David, the youngest and smallest.

But if that's the mistake Israel and Samuel made, the problem is we can be tempted to make exactly the same mistake. We're hard-wired to crown something or someone king, and if it's not God we'll find some other substitute to fill his place. Something or someone that will give us the security or peace, well-being or beauty we're seeking for. But just like Samuel, our judgment can be faulty. To quote CS Lewis, 'we are too easily satisfied'. We mistake the substitute for the reality, the temporary for the eternal, and the imitation for the ultimate.

But that doesn't mean that your underlying desires for beauty or glory, for freedom and security, for victory and wisdom are wrong. What's wrong is the king we choose to meet them.

The King Over Every King

You see, right before Zechariah tells us of the king coming on a donkey, God says through him, "I will encamp at my house as a guard, so that none shall march to and fro; no oppressor shall again march over them" (Zech 9:8). In other words, God is saying that he himself will come to Jerusalem and deliver his people from all oppression. And in the very next verse, he says, v9, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you;

righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

So, as Jesus takes that colt, and begins riding it down the Mount of Olives, the message he's sending is clear, this isn't just *a* king, this is *the* King, this is God come to his house, come to free his people from tyranny.

It's why Paul describes Jesus as 'The image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col 1:15). Because the firstborn in a family was the heir: heir to the fortune, heir to the throne. And so as firstborn of all creation, Christ is the heir to everything, to the Throne above every throne. It's why Zechariah says of this king on a donkey, 'His rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth' (Zech 9:10).

So, while the crowd waving their palm branches were thinking in terms of national glory and national pride, and restoring Israel's borders, Zechariah would have taken them aside and said, 'your vision is far too small, because the rule and reign of this king is going to have no borders.' It's no wonder that when told to silence the crowd, Jesus says the rocks will cry out. Because the king of rocks and plains, and mountains and valleys, and skies and seas, and stars and planets has come.

It's why, as he comes to his city and his temple, that it's not just the crowd who are expecting a coronation, and for him to be lifted up on their shoulders, and carried to his throne. We all are. And he is lifted up, but not on a throne.

You see, Judas Maccabeaus, the great Jewish revolutionary leader of two centuries previous, entered Jerusalem on a warhorse, but Jesus comes humbly, on a donkey. And he *is* enthroned, but on a cross made of wood not a throne made of gold. And nailed above his head were the words, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.' And he is crowned, but with thorns, not silver. And he is anointed, not with sacred oil, but the spit of his accusers. And two men do take the seats of honour beside him, but they're not dignitaries, they're crucified bandits, the scum of society, one at his right and one at his left. And in place of a royal robe, Christ the King is stripped naked.

You see this is the king, Paul says in Philippians 2, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant' (Phil 2:6-7). Because if Samuel's warning was, 'you want a king, but that king will make *you* serve *him and he will take from you*', then Christ came to serve not be served and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And Zechariah tells us why: v9-11, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he… [And] Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.'

And in the ancient world, waterless pits, dry wells, were used as somewhere to throw your prisoner, or forget about him. It's an image of the terror a king could inflict on his enemies. But the prophet Jeremiah takes that image and gives it a different spin. Because through Jeremiah, God says that's exactly how substitute kings and things will treat you. Jeremiah 2:13: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water". You run after these other things or kings,

thinking they'll give you the glory or the beauty, the victory or the security you're looking for, but as you do you turn from the fountain of life and fall headlong into a waterless pit.

But Christ the King has come, Zechariah says, to lift you out, and lift you up, and give you what no politician or celebrity, money or relationship, sex or instagram experience can ever give you.

And he does it, God says, through 'the blood of my covenant with you' (Zech 9:11) - by stepping into our place as our substitute.

And as he does, he becomes for us ***the King of joy***. As Zechariah says in v9, 'Rejoice greatly.' Why? Because your king is coming *to you*. The king who can give you an identity and a beauty that doesn't evaporate like the mist when you get snubbed by others, and a security and a victory that doesn't crumble at each election cycle. Instead he gives you a joy that endures because it's rooted in his enduring love for you - a love willing to die for you. So, rejoice greatly.

Secondly, he becomes for us ***the King over every fear***. You see in his gospel, John takes Zechariah's words, and like a diamond turns them to show us a different facet of joy, '*Fear not*, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming' (John 12:15). Because when you know that Christ loves you so much he went to the bottom of shame and rejection for you, to lift you up; and when you know that God has raised him up, and that your greatest enemies of sin and and death have been defeated, and you accuser silenced, you know you have nothing to fear. Because if God is for you, who can be against you? You're safe, because your king reigns.

But thirdly, he becomes for us **the King who heals every hurt.** Zechariah 9:10, 'I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, *and he shall speak peace to the nations.*' And, at first glance, that seems like a promise that this king will bring wars and conflict to an end. And it is. Because Christ's kingdom is expanded, not by the sword, by the Spirit and by Spirit transformed hearts.

And Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27) And when you know the depths he plumbed for you, and the measure of God's love for you, and that you are secure in him, amidst all the chaos and hurt of life Jesus speaks peace into your heart.

And yet, it's more even than that. You see, when God says, 'he shall speak *peace* to the nations' that word peace is the word *shalom*. The all encompassing peace of God. The peace in which every wrong is made right, and every hurt is healed, and not just your life but creation itself is renewed.

But which king can do that? Only a king whose heart is pierced with the grief, and whose body is crush with the sin and shame and brokenness of the world. Only a king who could absorb all that upon himself and exhaust it, and cry out 'It is finished!' And the only King who could do that is the King over all creation. And Christ's resurrection from the dead tells us, he has, and the new creation has begun. And by his wounds we are healed.

So, this Palm Sunday, crown him as your king - the King of joy, the king over your fears, and the king who heals every hurt.