Behold Your King

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Date: 25 May 2025

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0:00] From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows will spring, renewed shall! The crownless again shall be king. Some of you may know those words from the Lord of the Rings.

! They're a kind of prophecy that J.R.R. Tolkien, wrote in the story about the true king finally being revealed, the crownless one stepping out of the shadows to take his rightful place upon the throne. And as a church family, we've been holding our breath for, I think, the best part of two years to see something like that happen in Matthew's gospel. The very first words of the gospel that we heard 21 chapters ago told us that Jesus is next in line to the throne of God's kingdom. He is the son of David.

But in fact, history has been holding its breath for far longer than two years. Matthew has peppered his gospel with prophecies that told God's people to expect a king who fits the description of Jesus. Early on, Matthew even told us his birthplace was foretold hundreds of years before he came, and you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler, a king who will shepherd my people Israel. And so we, with the world and all history have waited, when would he be revealed? When would he ride into the royal capital for his coronation and enthronement? When would we behold the king coming?

Well, today we hold our breath no longer, friends. The time has come. The city is in his sights, and his royal steed is being prepared. Jesus has been talking about this moment for chapters and chapters now that he must go to Jerusalem because in his final destination, he will fulfill his ultimate destiny. And so when we read verse 1, when they drew near to Jerusalem, Jerusalem, we should know that this is it. This is it. He's rounded the last bend. This is the final straight. His crown awaits him. But what kind of crown will it be for a king like him?

[3:06] Jesus will be in and out of Jerusalem quite a bit over the coming chapters. It's likely he's actually staying in a place nearby called Bethany, which is a bit outside of the city. But here in our passage, we're told how Jesus chose to travel this road for the first kind of symbolic time.

And he's clearly thought it through. It's carefully calculated. His point is very, very clear. And when you step back and think about it, you know, Jesus isn't normally one for big gestures, is he? You know, he doesn't typically go around making a spectacle. Yes, he does things publicly, but he doesn't seek the spotlight. In fact, up until now, he's sworn his followers to secrecy, say nothing, he said. But on this occasion, he could not have made a bigger entrance because Jesus chooses now to enter Jerusalem as the long-promised Savior King of God's people.

Now, let's see that together. Our first point this morning, the Savior King is finally here. And now, if we didn't know better, we could easily think that Jesus's choice of vehicle is pretty ordinary. A donkey, or actually two donkeys, isn't it? A donkey and its colt, which is a baby donkey.

Now, donkeys are nice animals, okay? There's some donkeys at Hazelhead Park if you'd like to meet one. They're lovely, friendly creatures, but they're nothing special. And especially in Jesus's time, they were basically just very, very slow cars, right? And they were used for carrying things, carrying people. They were working animals, as they are in parts of the world today. You wouldn't use a donkey for a special occasion, and you certainly would never ride a donkey into battle.

But three things tell us Jesus's choice of a donkey on this occasion isn't ordinary at all. Firstly, Matthew tells us that as Jesus and the disciples were coming up to a place called Bethphage, Jesus supernaturally locates the donkeys in the village. To just see that verse 2, he said to the disciples, go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her. Now, we might wonder if the donkeys are immediately inside the village. Could he just see them there? But then why would he need to tell the disciples where they'd find them? If they were visible, surely he'd just say, see those donkeys over there? Will you bring them over to me? No, the point is Jesus knows something that the disciples don't know and can't know, which is that there are

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donkeys there in the village. And not just any donkeys, but a donkey with its colt which is exactly the combination that Jesus needs to make his big entrance. Jesus's knowledge at this point is not merely human or ordinary. It is divine, supernatural knowledge.
[6:48] This is special, secondly, not an ordinary thing to do because Jesus commandeers the donkeys. Notice that. Perhaps we've heard this so many times, we just kind of gloss over it, but he doesn't buy the donkeys. He doesn't even ask for the donkeys, right? He just says, go and get me those donkeys.

And did you spot in whose name Jesus says the disciples should bring them to him? If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, the Lord needs them.
Now, if you were a Judean peasant in the first century near Jerusalem and someone spoke to you about the Lord, your thoughts would not naturally turn to the man Jesus. You would think God, right?
The Lord, Yahweh. And it is in that name, the name of the Lord, that Jesus commandeers these donkeys. But he's clearly speaking about himself, isn't he? He needs the donkeys. He's using these animals on his own authority, which, friends, is divine authority, the Lord, because he is Lord and God.
He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He makes the sun to rise and the rain to fall. In his name, he orders creation according to his perfect will, including these donkeys.
[8:27] But again, interesting, isn't it? Jesus doesn't normally go around claiming people's animals and possessions, though he could. This is a very special request, isn't it? It's a one-off, even.

He uses the donkeys because he, the Lord, needs them. But for what? Why does Jesus need these donkeys? Well, thirdly, and most importantly, we see this is not ordinary because Matthew tells us it's to fulfill an ancient prophecy. Have a look again at verse 4. This took place to fulfill 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, and on a colt, the fall of a beast of burden. Those words come from the prophet Zechariah, which we had read for us earlier. And Zechariah was writing about 500 years before Jesus.
So prophecies like this were not fulfilled every day. In fact, no son of David had come to Jerusalem in the space of that half a millennium, especially not riding on a donkey.
But that is how your true and rightful king will come to you, said Zechariah. And now Jesus prepares to come just like that. A donkey and its colt, which he will ride into Zion.
You know, sometimes you hear people say, if Jesus was around today, he would be horrified that a religion had been built around him or that, you know, billions of people claimed to worship him.
[10:36] He was a simple man. He might have been a prophet, but he just loved people. He taught good values. He was a good man. But he never intended for anyone to think of him as, you know, some kind of king or someone to obey or someone to give our lives to. He'd be shocked to see us all here calling him Lord and King and Christ. But friends, the four best historical sources that we have on the life of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all record that Jesus deliberately and self-consciously fulfilled these words. He knew his Old Testament.

He knew what it meant for him to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. It's been called the triumphal entry for a reason. He did not hear the crowds cheering him and throwing their cloaks on the ground and think, oh, no, you know, what have I done? What a muddle. I just had sore feet and didn't want to walk it.
I didn't mean for any of this to happen. You've got the wrong idea. No. He did it, says Matthew, to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet. Behold, your king is coming to you, mounted on a donkey.
Friends, if you're here today and you think Jesus was just a good man or even just a prophet, nothing more, this is what you have to wrestle with. Jesus clearly thought he was more than that.
Friends, Christianity is not a big misunderstanding. Jesus did this so that we would know that he is the promised king from God. His entrance that day into Jerusalem is a big neon sign that says, I am the one you've been waiting for, stepping now out of the shadows to be crowned and take the throne of God's kingdom. Here I am. Behold your king. But what kind of king is he?
[12:44] Well, Zechariah gives us the key word there in verse 5, if you see it. What kind of king is he? He is humble. Humble. So he is a king, yes, but he is not like other kings. See, the context Zechariah was writing into in his time was a time of great upheaval. So rival kingdoms fighting for power in the region.

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When God's people were humanly speaking, very weak, very vulnerable, they could well have looked at their neighbors and their rich and powerful kings and thought, we'll have one of those please.
A fighting king, a mighty king, a warlike king. But instead, God promises them a humble king, a king who rides a donkey, not a warhorse. Because when God's king takes the throne, there's going to be no more need for warhorses or chariots. Remember, you would never ride a donkey into battle. God's king is not that kind of king. The battle bow will be cut off, says Zechariah. And he, that is God's humble king, shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. Comparing the great rulers of history, Napoleon Bonaparte once said, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself founded empires. But on what did we rest the creation of our genius? Upon sheer force, Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love. Jesus did not come riding a warhorse or in a chariot like a king of this world to fight with a sword. He came riding a donkey in humility. He came to make peace by being humbly crowned and taking his throne because his crown would be a crown of thorns and his throne a cross of wood.
Friends, isn't this the mystery at the heart of our faith that Jesus is the humble ruler, the gentle king, that at one and the same time his entrance is triumphant and it is lowly, that he who is everything, the Lord God made himself nothing so that he could speak peace to the nations and draw all people to himself.
[15:35] Of course, Jesus knew full well what was waiting for him in Jerusalem. Three times he's told his disciples, we must go to Jerusalem and there I will be rejected, suffer and die. Rejected, suffer and die. Rejected, suffer and die. His destination and his destiny are tied together and set in the satnav of eternity.

He's called the king's cross because he comes humbly to the rescue of his people as king.
You know, there's a line actually of Zechariah's prophecy that Matthew misses out. I wonder if any of you spotted it as we read or heard them. I'm guessing he does it as a roundabout way to draw our attention to it, leaving out this line. As I reflected on it, it's a little bit like when we say the Lord's prayer together at home. You know, the way to get the boys to say the words is to leave them out. So, you know, our father in and a little voice says, heaven, hallowed be your, you know, name. Well, God's people will have known their prophets. They could have filled in the blank here. I wonder if you can remember what it was from our first reading. Zechariah chapter 9, say to the daughter of Zion, behold, your king is coming to you. Righteous and having salvation is he. Humble and mounted on a donkey. Would you believe it? Would you believe it? Zechariah's prophecy is of a king from God who would come to save his people. People of the living God. Behold, your king has come to you, humbly mounted on a donkey to save us from our sins and make peace by the blood of his cross. Behold him. All that is still ahead of him in this gospel, yet he rides on into the city.
[17:50] But before we rush on in Matthew, Matthew wants us to lean into this moment. We won't be back here again. Once Jesus is through the gates, it's a one-way ticket to the cross. So friends, right now, what are we meant to do with him? Okay, what's the right response to King Jesus today as we behold him riding upon this donkey into Zion? Well, Matthew wants us, verses 6 to 11, to follow the crowd. This is our second point, follow the crowd. Now, I guess it's pretty rare that you've ever heard a preacher say to you, follow the crowd, okay? And that is not a good thing to say generally, is it? We don't follow the crowd, you know, do what everyone else does or anything. Even in the gospels, it's not every point in the gospels, you could say, follow the crowd. The crowds very often in the gospels are one foot in, one foot out, okay? They're all for Jesus, and then they shrink away.

Sometimes they turn against him. In the next few chapters, we'll see that most painfully. But at this point, the crowds do what they're supposed to do. They respond rightly to Jesus.
They show that by what they do for him. Like the disciples who spread their cloaks on the backs of the donkeys for Jesus to sit on, most of the crowds, we're told, took off their cloaks and spread them on the road for Jesus to ride over. They're creating, in effect, a red carpet for the king to ride on into the city. And they've turned it into the occasion that it really is. It's a royal procession. Others, we're told, cut branches from the trees and laid them on the roads. From the other gospels, we know they were palm branches, which were a symbol of victory. So when a king returned from winning in war, people would run out to greet him to celebrate the victory and wave these palm branches in a celebration that he had won the war for them. So they are acting towards Jesus as

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the king he is, the true king and the triumphant king. And I guess if we're Christians here today, we'd like to think, wouldn't we, that if we'd been there, that we would have done the same. You know, the whole laying our cloaks on the ground before Jesus, the waving, the palm branches, cutting them from the trees. But I wonder, now he's ascended into heaven, our triumphant, victorious king seated upon his throne, do we do the same? I don't mean throwing our clothes on the street, but treating him as our triumphant king in our actions, giving him the honor, the place in our lives that he deserves because of who he is.
These cloaks would have been valuable pieces of clothing. People then didn't have three or four coats hanging on the hooks by their door. They likely would have had just one big, thick, outer cloak to go out in and perhaps to keep them warm at night, certainly while they were traveling.
[21:21] And that is what they are throwing down on the ground. Not a cheap throwaway piece of clothing, but possibly their one and only cloak to be ridden over by farm animals that the king was seated upon.

I wonder, friends, what do we think in our lives is too precious for us to cast at Jesus's feet? Perhaps our wardrobe is an indication of that. How many or what quality of cloaks do we have hanging? And what does that say about what's important to us? Perhaps it's our homes that we don't want trampled by the feet of others. Perhaps it's our reputation at school or at work that we would rather keep up here than for it to be brought down here with humble Jesus. Perhaps our pride that keeps us from showing Jesus too much visible devotion or noticeable commitment in front of other people. There could be any number of things in this room that we count as too precious to throw down at the feet of the king Jesus. But brothers and sisters, this morning the crowd reminds us that there is nothing that we should hold back from him or count as too valuable to spend or to use for his glory because we celebrate his victory and because we love his appearing.
But the crowd show a right response to Jesus too by what they say. We're told in verse 9, the crowds that went before him and followed him were shouting, Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.
It's actually one of the richest and fullest confessions of Jesus' identity and purpose we get anywhere in the Gospels and it comes at a very significant point. Son of David, as we've hinted, is a royal title that God promised King David a thousand years before one of his sons would always be king in his kingdom and his kingdom would last forever. So the crowds are giving Jesus his proper title, acknowledging him as their proper king. And therefore they cry out something else to him.
[24:02] The words of an ancient song from the Bible, Psalm 118. The word Hosanna means please save us.

Please save us. You can actually hear it shares a root with names like Hosea and Joshua and their namesake Jesus, which means that the Lord saves. But Hosanna is a cry or a plea for salvation. And we get that in Psalm 118 along with the other thing they say, save us, we pray, O Lord. O Lord, we pray, give us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The crowds are basically quoting that Psalm. And we'll sing those words together shortly. But if you read the whole Psalm later, you'll see it's the perfect Psalm and song for this occasion. It's written by a king who's triumphed in battle and returns to the praise and adoration of his people. Okay, these words could hardly be better words as the soundtrack to Jesus's triumphal entry.
And those are the words that the crowd cheer for him. They praise him. We bless you. And they ask him to save them. Hosanna, save us.
And above all, friends, today, those are the two things that should be on our lips and in our hearts as we behold our King Jesus. Brothers and sisters, we should praise him with our words. It's wonderful, isn't it, to do that as a crowd, a congregation, as we are here today. This is the time in our week, isn't it, that we have as God's people to gather and to praise our triumphant, victorious, risen and reigning King Jesus. Here we are. We're the crowd, aren't we, in our singing, our speaking, our prayers.
[26:18] Friends, friends, friends, that is why we're here. The primary reason not to catch up with friends, not even to be kind of reset for the week. It's to bless and praise the Lord.

So come to praise him, be here for it, and come prepared for it, to worship him, to praise, to bless him with our words. It's right that we do that with our mouths. And of course, that's true, not only in our services, is it, but in our day to day. You know, I wonder how much of your personal prayer time is taken up just with praise. Of course, God urges us to come to him with all of our needs, our

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anxieties. But we are urged all the more, aren't we, to come to him with our praise and our worship. We should be quick to do that. Lord, you are mighty. You are faithful. You are true and good and kind. You are loving, Lord. You are everything and made yourself nothing for a sinner like me. I praise you, Lord. Bless you for your greatness, your goodness, who you are and what you've done. You have all the things Jesus teaches us to pray. This comes first, doesn't it? Hallowed be your name. We'd like to think of ourselves on that day, wouldn't we? Cheering with the crowd, praising him, blessing him with our mouths. But friends, do we bless him now?

And we must cry for his rescue to save us. The crowd say this to Jesus on his way to the cross. But we stand today in a much better place than they did because we stand this side of the cross out of the empty tomb. He has died for our sins and been raised to life again, which means that as we call upon him to save us, he can and he will. As we call upon his name, he saves. If you have never done that, you have never called on his name. You've never asked him to save you. Do and he will. [28:48] Recognize him as Christ, the king from God. Look at his death and say, Lord, because you humbled yourself to death on the cross, please save me. Hosanna, save us, Lord, we pray.

The crowds don't say that in vain, do they? They don't realize it, but they are lining his way to the cross, to that saving work. They're singing the soundtrack that will go with him to his death. And it is this, save us, save us, save us, Lord. So friends, when we say that to the Lord Jesus today from our hearts and with our mouths, know that he is the king come to save and he surely will. Behold, your king has come to you righteous and having salvation is he. A few weeks ago, we began this section of the gospel with the question, who then can be saved? Well, here again is the answer, those who humbly call on him to save them. Friends, our king has come. Let us pour out our praise to him and cry out to him to save us.

And let's do that now as we come in prayer to him. Let's pray together. Okay. Lord Jesus, we praise you and we bless you for your humility, that you are the Lord of glory and the Lord of all. And yet you stooped down and condescended, took on flesh, became a servant and died on the cross to serve and to save your people, to be our king. We thank you and we bless you for that.

And Lord, we do pray now that you would save us. Lord, those who as yet have not been saved, that you would come near with your salvation and grant that they would call upon your name.

And Lord, those of us who do know your saving work in our hearts, that you would continue to deliver us from our sin. Lord, rescue us, we pray, from the worst of ourselves. Free our hearts, Lord, to praise you freely. Take our eyes from off ourselves and turn them to our risen King Jesus, for behold, he's come. These things we pray and ask in his name. Amen.

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