

## ***r u kidding?* Part 6: Would You Crown Jesus King?**

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Scripture: Matthew 21:1-16

Would you crown Jesus king if he invited you to? It seems like we *should* crown him, but the question sounds more like a challenge. What if we *don't* crown Jesus king? Will we suffer God's wrath? Will we be thrown into the fires of hell?

Kingship seems so *domineering*. Like if we crown Jesus king, we'll never have our own say in our affairs ever again. Gentle invitations turn to commands; questions become statements; favors become obligations. Surely Jesus isn't asking the people to do more than recognize that he's an inspired sage – full of wisdom and grace. He's not expecting anything more than applause, is he?

Jesus isn't asking for applause. He's expecting obedience and loyalty. Not the kind that enslaves us, but a kind that frees us. He's not an ordinary king in this regard, and the kingdom he invites us to inhabit isn't ordinary either.

In case you missed the significance of what Jesus is doing as he rides down the Mt. of Olives, during the biggest festival of the Jewish year, with people laying their cloaks in front of him as he goes, hear the prophesy of Zechariah:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, **your king comes** to you; triumphant and victorious is he, **humble and riding on a donkey**, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)*

Or recall when Jehu usurped the throne from Joram, king of Israel . What did the people do to acknowledge the legitimacy of the usurper?

*Then hurriedly [the people] all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, "Jehu is king." (2 Kings 9:13)*

During this series we've been exploring Jesus' invitation to become like a child, viewing his parables and sayings through children's eyes as a way of understanding what he's really trying to tell us. Thus far, this approach has been tremendously clarifying. And so it is with today's story. Perhaps a little *too* clarifying! You be the judge.

The children are crying "Hossana!" which means "Please, save us!" This is also a sign of kingship. "Please, save us" is what the people cry when a new king comes to power, as we find in Psalm 118:

*Please save us, O Lord! O Lord, please give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.*

*(Psalm 118:25-27)*

Accompanying Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem, *the children shout “Hosanna!” because they are facing a future from which they need to be saved.* In Jesus’ day, the only way you could avoid a future free from crushing poverty is to have been born into wealth. If your parents weren’t already wealthy, there was no social or economic ladder you could climb to escape poverty. You were destined to live without economic security, without a political voice, and without hope of social change. You could look forward to being considered little more than animals by the few who enjoyed the fruits of the system, for whom the system worked just fine.

A child born in 1<sup>st</sup> C Israel would not look forward to family vacations on the beaches of the Mediterranean. Only a lifetime of hard labor. There would be no “health care,” either, at least if you had to pay anything for it. Instead, you would have a few simple home remedies and a dubious incantation or two to heal you or a loved one. And in contrast to Israel’s early days, when everyone was allotted their own land and all debts were cancelled every 50 years, now you were more likely destined to work as a sharecropper with debt piled so high there would never be any hope of working free of it.

“Please, save us!” You can imagine Israel’s children looking to the future and wanting to be saved from it. Their loud Hosannas act like a vote of no confidence in the leadership Rome had installed over Israel. Shouting “Hosanna!” was the equivalent of shouting, “The Emperor has no clothes.” Though young, the children seem to intuit that they have nothing to lose by replacing the Emperor with a Messiah who seems to be all about creating a world in which all people are given the respect and dignity of being God’s children.

Good thing we don’t live in *that* kind of world today ... Or do our children, like those of old, still need a savior? And a future?

[Choir sings “Hosanna!” from Jesus Christ Superstar]

Of course, any self-respecting Jew in Jesus’ day would have recognized that Israel needed a new king and savior. Everyone felt the Roman Emperor had no clothes. One might expect them to raise a mighty chorus of Hosannas. Yet only the children cry out Hosanna, and presumably the crowd laying cloaks at Jesus’ feet. What’s wrong with this picture?

Jesus had amassed a sizeable crowd even if not everyone in Jerusalem was on board with his bid for kingship. Some modern scholars speculate that Jesus would have had only a few dozen with him as he made his way down the Mt. of Olives, but evidence of the crowd’s enormity is found in what happens next. Jesus assumes control of the Temple, toppling the tables of the money changers and pronouncing the Temple’s restoration as a house of prayer. He does so just as Jerusalem is beginning its Passover celebrations, which means hundreds if not thousands of extra Roman soldiers were on hand to keep the peace. And Jesus doesn’t just disrupt the Temple market place. He takes up residence there, healing people, teaching, leaving at night

and returning during the day for more. Jesus absolutely could not have gotten away with this if he wasn't continually surrounded by a very large crowd of supporters.

The reason why the whole of Jerusalem wasn't rushing to join Jesus despite his many followers was because Romans were never ones to take insurrection lightly. When Israel would rebel against Roman rule just four decades later, Rome did not hesitate to respond with the greatest show of military force Israel had seen in centuries. They destroyed Jerusalem and everything within it, including the Temple.

Despite Reza Aslan's claims, Jesus is no zealot. His supporters have not been training to kill Romans. They've been training to resist the Romans non-violently. They've been training for quite some time, in fact, to offer love in response to anyone who sought to do them harm. Do you remember Jesus' "stump speech" which he had been preaching since the start of his ministry – his Sermon on the Mount? Here's a telling excerpt:

*You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."  
But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;  
and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;  
and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.  
Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.  
You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."  
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,  
so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.  
(Matthew 5:38-45)*

Faced with a non-violent crowd of thousands who are making a large political and religious spectacle but turning the other cheek and loving their enemy, the Romans' hands are tied. They want to put this would-be king in jail – or worse – but how can they do so without causing a bloody riot and making themselves look like monsters, beating people who refuse to return force with force? They'll have to wait until a more opportune time, when the crowds can't protect him ... And surely the Temple officials will be more than happy to give them whatever help they can.

At the Temple, the children continue to cry, "Hosanna!" Please, save us! And the Temple authorities become even more irate. It was one thing to shout, "Save us!" when it was clear that Jesus was inviting the people to crown him king, but quite another when he's here at the Temple seeking to be anointed High Priest as well! Here at the Temple, shouts of "Hosanna" do not just imply that the *Emperor* has no clothes, but that the *High Priest* has no clothes as well. It's like saying, "Our *religious leaders* have sold us out. They don't lift a finger to help us build a better future because they've become part of the system!"

The Temple protest isn't against Judaism, as some believe. This is a protest against religious leaders who have forgotten their calling; who have forgotten that their God is one who *liberates* people from bondage, who leads people to a Promised Land with pillars of fire; who stands up

for the most vulnerable in society whenever they are trampled underfoot – including by their own political leaders.

In Jesus' day, the Temple had become so much a part of the have-and-have-not system that they were perfectly fine, for instance, allowing money-changers to charge exorbitant rates of exchange so that the people could purchase animals for their Passover sacrifice. The animals themselves were being sold for much more than the going rate, including pigeons, which were specifically provided for the poor who could not afford a lamb. It did the poor little good to buy a pigeon or two for the same price as a lamb would have cost at any other time of year. As long as the Temple leadership received their cut of the proceeds, they ignored the injustice.

Even though many, if not most, of Israel's people would have found Roman rule to be deeply offensive and the Temple leadership to be sell-outs, it is hard to believe that anyone would have considered Jesus anything but crazy to rebel against them. Only, those who accompanied Jesus on his journey into Jerusalem seem to have thought he was the only sane one around.

Some like to think that Jesus' supporters were fickle – that they were the very ones who, just days later, were shouting "Crucify!" after crying "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday. But that was an entirely different crowd. Just how fickle do you suppose people are who have decided they have nothing left to lose; that they have no future if it's a future without Jesus?

This year during Holy Week, you might be tempted to ask yourself which crowd would you have joined: the "Hosanna!" crowd or the "Crucify!" crowd. It's a speculative question to be sure. We weren't around back then so we can't really know how we would have reacted.

True enough. But we are around now. And Jesus is still inviting you to crown him. Can you hear the children crying "Hosanna!" even now? Seen through the eyes of today's children, how can we do anything but conclude that our political, economic, and religious system has sold their future out from under them? How can we not conclude that our children need to be saved from the world we are leaving them?

As our children look ahead they see a world divided into "haves" and "have-nots," where you must be born into wealth if you are ever to find anything close to economic security or independence. They look to our political and economic leaders for hope, yet instead of finding people who are trying to fix the problem, they discover that our leaders are part of the problem. When they turn to religious leaders for hope, they find little to suggest they are any different than the political leaders. They hear a "prosperity gospel" being preached that claims that the rich are rich and the poor are poor because of God's will. Or they hear that religion deals with "spiritual" matters, and that faith has no engagement with "worldly" politics or economics. Can you hear our children shouting, "Hosanna! Please, save us!"?

As our children look beyond their future economic needs and consider what else lies in store, they find a world that has seemingly reached a state of perpetual warfare; where those in the halls of power are kept in power through the "need" to continually create and maintain enemies. Our children see a world that continually seeks – and finds – more powerful and efficient ways of killing each other. Will this violent quest end well for *anybody*?

Yet when our children turn to religion expecting to find an alternative to warfare, they discover that the very people who should be at the forefront of peace-making and loving their enemy are themselves fanning the flames of war. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders (among others) are claiming that only their religion is the “right” one and that the rest can – and should – go to hell, figuratively and literally. Many religious leaders give lip service to loving their enemies but ultimately claim that their enemies see love as weakness so, they claim, the only choice we have is to apply brute force.

Can you hear the children crying “Hosanna! Please, save us!” this Palm Sunday?

Finally, when our children look to Planet Earth itself, they find little to comfort them about the future. Within our youngest children’s lifetimes, we are likely to reach a point where the carbon levels in our atmosphere will warm the earth to the point where natural processes will release enormous reserves of methane and other greenhouse gasses trapped beneath layers of permafrost on land and ice in the sea, causing our climate to continue growing warmer even if we reduce our carbon emissions to zero.

What are our political leaders doing about climate change? Arguing. Denying. Then arguing and denying some more, all while being bankrolled by people who profit most from poisoning the atmosphere. Our religious leaders are little better. Instead of being at the forefront of conserving God’s Creation, many claim that God has given us dominion over the earth in such a way that we can do whatever we want without serious consequences ... or they claim, unbelievably, that it is *God’s will* to destroy the earth.

Can you hear the children of today crying, “Hosanna! Please, save us!” in the face of the greatest threats to the future of the earth since the beginning of human civilization?

If so, then perhaps today you will add your own “Hosanna!” to theirs. And perhaps you will do more than shout “Hosanna” but will crown Jesus as your king, offering your love, obedience, and loyalty. If just the Christians of the world would make Jesus their true king, then perhaps all of us would discover that Jesus came to free us, not enslave us. He came to save the world, not end it. No kidding.