

Is Jesus our King?

Matthew 21:1-11 and 27:11-54

In the USA just now, the presidential election campaign is ramping up. Over the last few months, we've seen people stand up and put themselves on centre stage, proclaiming why people in their nation should put their trust in them as a leader to represent them.

People's lives will be changed depending on who they elect and how that person serves them. And a much commented upon feature of this election campaign has been how people's behaviour with each other here and now has been determined by who they are backing, too.

Here in Scotland, we've got our parliament elections coming up in a few weeks. The various parties' literature has started dropping through our letterboxes onto our doormats. More people who are putting themselves in the spotlight, seeking to be recognised and trusted as our leaders. And our lives will be affected by the choice that we make with that.

In Matthew 21:1-11, Jesus does something similar. Except in this case, the stakes are a heck of a lot higher. The stakes are life and death. For Jesus, And for you.

In this passage, Jesus puts Himself in the spotlight, centre stage, claiming to be a King. He doesn't do it with eloquent speeches, a media team and money in the bank. He does it, very simply, by riding a donkey into Jerusalem. How does *that* make Him someone who claims to be a *King*?

In the Old Testament, God spoke to His people through various prophets over many long years, whispering consistently and encouragingly, 'Some day I will send you someone. Someone who is my Son, and your King.' For centuries, the Jews had been waiting for this Messiah figure. Someone whom God's people could set their hopes and expectations for freedom and life upon, if they would bend the knee to this King and follow Him.

One of those messages came to God's people through a prophet called Zechariah. In Zechariah 9:9, God says that this Son of God and King of God's people will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and her colt. Matthew quotes Zechariah in v.5, to spell it out for us. In riding a donkey and its young colt together into the city of Jerusalem, Jesus was saying, loud and clear, without any words - I am God's Son. I am the King of God's people.

Crowds had been gathering around Jesus for months and years now, feverishly chatting away to each other about whether this amazing person might just be the King they had been waiting to invest their hopes and expectations and very lives in.

In this action, Jesus was confirming to the crowds of people following Him what they wanted to know - He *was* saying that He is the King of God's people. That to belong to God and to be set free by God meant making Jesus the leader to represent them.

So, at this clear signal from Jesus, the crowds around Him dare to do what they'd been wondering about doing for so long. They are ready to declare Jesus the King, as He rides into Jerusalem.

This is right under the noses of the Roman occupiers, who were there to make sure that nobody was called 'King' except Caesar. And it was under the noses of the religious authorities in Jerusalem, who were there to make sure that nobody threw their nation away again chasing the pipe dreams of another pretender to the throne.

When Jesus made His move, He set into motion a train of events that would change things forever. People got behind Him, lifting Him up in a train of praise, shouting to the city they entered, '*This is the Son of David! This is the One from God we've been waiting for! This is our King! Come and join the revolution!*'

This raised alarm bells for the Romans and the Jewish religious authorities. You can see why by the end of the week that followed this big entrance, things turned fatally nasty. I said earlier that the stakes were life and death for Jesus. It's more than that, really. Jesus knew that this simple act of riding in on a donkey was going to raise the heat in Jerusalem to the point where He *would* be killed. It was coming.

Which leads an intelligent person to ask, 'Why did He do it, then?' Well, because the stakes for you and me were life and death, too. But we'll come to that later on.

We read in v.10 that the whole of Jerusalem was stirred. Jesus and His followers had got the attention of the city. And the city wanted to know, 'Who is this?' It makes me wonder how Jesus' followers can get the attention of *our* city.

How can Jesus' followers make enough noise about Him to get Inverness asking, 'Who is this?'

Here's another question:

If you were asked to explain who Jesus is, what would you say?

There's a lot we can say about Jesus, of course. If you wonder what to talk about when the subject of Jesus comes up in conversation, there's no better place to start than these three words: *Jesus is King*.

There's a lot that leads off from that starting point. Having a King means not being in charge of your own life, but submitting your life to Him. It means changing sides - from belonging to the world, to belonging to the community where Jesus is King - what Jesus called, 'The Kingdom of God.'

It means overthrowing anything else that is first in your life, and placing your allegiance, loyalty and commitment at the feet of Jesus. It means following His orders. Going where He leads. Believing in Him - not in the way that children believe in the tooth fairy, but believing in Him like a person invests their whole trust in a leader - who He is, His view of the world and how it is to be changed forever.

It means trusting Jesus to represent you, and to do things on your behalf that you cannot do in your own strength. That's what we do on a much smaller scale with the leaders we elect. But again, whether you trust Jesus' leadership or not involves the much higher stakes of life and death.

Talking about 'Jesus is King' is what Matthew and the other gospels do. We're going to read a few chapters on now, from Matthew 27:11-54. It's Palm Sunday, and next Sunday we celebrate the greatest thing that has ever happened in this world in the resurrection of Jesus to life. But before we do that, we take this Sunday together to read the account of Jesus' death, and to think about why that matters so much.

As I read this account to you, listen out for all the references to Jesus being the King of the Jews (God's people), and the Son of God. Some people in this account are questioning the idea. A couple are claiming it is true. A lot of them are mocking it. But as Matthew has us watch Jesus dying on a cross, he is very deliberately putting this question in our minds as we look on - '*Is Jesus our King?*'

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

'You have said so,' Jesus replied.

When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, 'Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?' But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge – to the great amazement of the governor.

Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, 'Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.'

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

'Which of the two do you want me to release to you?' asked the governor.

'Barabbas,' they answered.

'What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' Pilate asked.

They all answered, 'Crucify him!'

'Why? What crime has he committed?' asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!'

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'

All the people answered, 'His blood is on us and on our children!'

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers round him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. 'Hail, king of the Jews!' they said. They spat on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked

him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means 'the place of the skull'). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!'

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, "I am the Son of God."' In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, 'He's calling Elijah.' Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him.'

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'

What was the turning point in that passage where it became clear that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of God's people?

Strangely enough, it was the moment that Jesus died. In that moment, the earth shook. Those gathered at the cross felt forcefully that God was doing something. The mocking and the questioning stopped. And one man - a Roman centurion - said what nobody else would accept or say out loud: 'Surely He was the Son of God!'

In the strange, incredible, matchless plan of God, it was in the moment of His Son's *death* that people discovered that He really was the King of God's people. Next week, we celebrate what happened afterwards that changes the centurion's sentence by one vital word... Not 'surely He *was* the Son of God!' but rather, 'surely He *is* the Son of God!'

Before we get there though, let's see what Jesus being the King who was enthroned on a cross means for us, and why the stakes in bowing the knee to Him are life and death for us.

Jesus only speaks twice in this passage. In v.11, He is asked if He is the King of God's people, and Jesus says, 'yes.' He confirms very publicly, literally on trial before the world, that this is who He claims to be. The other time is in v.46, where He cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

In those words, we find out what the King does on our behalf. On the cross, Jesus experienced something that He had never known before. The total abandonment of God. The complete absence of God's presence.

Lots of people feel like God's not there - though in truth He's present though they can't see it, or else their life would fall apart completely. But this was something beyond that. God really *wasn't* there, because He turned His face from the extraordinary sum total of human sin that was heaped upon the shoulders of His own perfect Son.

For the first and only time in the relationship between God the Father and God the Son - a relationship unparalleled in its closeness and intimacy - the Son felt the total absence and rejection of His Father.

Why? Why would a King do that? The answer is as simple and as deep as this: Love. God loves you so much, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in this King might not perish (that is, die and be cut off from God completely), but have eternal life.

This King did not come to conscript you to hard labour and ruin your life. He came to die for you. To be your representative on the cross. To take the fall for all those He leads, who follow Him. To take the punishment for everything you are guilty of in God's eyes, and see it destroyed in His own body rather than yours.

The stakes are life and death here because He is not forcing His rule upon you. Only those who choose to make Jesus their King will have Him as King, have their sins wiped clean by His loving death, experience the forgiveness and freedom and open door to God and forever life with Him that brings.

Matthew tells us in v.51 that at the moment that Jesus died, and sin with Him, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And this was God's welcome invitation to us.

Until then, God's people understood the temple to be the place where God was present on Earth. But He was only accessible at one time of the year, by one person, the High Priest, when he made all sorts of careful preparations to atone for the sin of the people who approached God through him.

The curtain was a physical sign that we did not have access to God because the guilt in our lives prevented it. When the Son of God died on the cross, our King tore down that barrier. It was torn from top to bottom. God Himself was declaring to those who would see and believe it, 'I have opened the way to me now. Jesus has removed every barrier between us. So come in, and have life with me. Start now, and know that it's forever.'

So it turns out, all of this is what Jesus being King means for those who will believe it: Submitting to Him means letting Him take control of our destinies instead of trying to design our own. But the great thing about that is, instead of being destined for an eternal death that we can't design our way out of, we're destined for an eternal life that the King wants to lead us into.

Jesus being King means changing sides: From the world, to His Kingdom. But the great thing about that is, instead of being on the side that's rotting and

falling apart in the world that won't last; we're on the side that's building and growing and renewing all things in the world that will last forever.

Jesus being King means overthrowing whatever else is first in our lives. But the great thing about that is, instead of experiencing a permanent loss in our identity when that thing runs out or dies or leaves or lets you down, as all finite things do; you experience an eternal gain in finding your identity as a follower of the King who never runs out, overcomes death, never leaves and never lets you down.

Jesus being King means trusting Him to represent you. And the great thing about that is, instead of God looking at your life's good points and bad points, He's looking at the perfection of Jesus lived out on your behalf.

You may think you're not so bad when you look around at other people. But when you look up to God - when you take time in your life to genuinely do that - do you really think you can stand before His glory and majesty and perfection without hanging your head? Do you really think that when God's eyes penetrate yours, you're going to puff your chest out and say 'I deserve to be with you?'

You absolutely don't. And I promise you this - I absolutely don't. But the great thing is that I've got a King who says to His Father God, 'Scott's with me. I have paid the price for all His guilt, Father. I love him. You love him. I will represent him before you, Father God.'

There is nothing in this whole world that matters more to me, and more importantly, to God, than you hearing and knowing and believing that Jesus is your King, who died for you, who calls you to let Him represent you before God, and whose leadership brings only the best of things in this life and forever.

I finish with this verse, Romans 10:9, which was a penny-dropping, faith-beginning moment for many of us here: 'That if you confess with your mouth, "*Jesus is Lord,*" and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.'" This Easter, make a call. Is Jesus your King?