

## **Palm Sunday 2026. John 19:16b–22; 12:12–27. The Book of Love**

The two passages read this morning, feel like a paradox, a contradiction. One passage details the suffering and abuse inflicted on a man. The other celebrates him as a victorious ruler- one who has conquered and will reign. How can it be, that the man praised as the King of Israel, is humiliated and placed on a cross. Jesus in many ways exists in the space of contradiction and paradox. Mark Bigland Pritchard shared with us last week, the ways that Jesus is a different kind of king. How does Jesus, not being how we want him to be, bring us hope in this world? That is a question we are going to explore.

To do that, we first need to look at why Jesus had these expectations upon him. It is easy in hindsight to chuckle at how the disciples regularly miss the point. Without being steeped in ancient Jewish culture, we wonder how the people were so wrong in their Messianic expectations. If we try and look at Jesus through their eyes, we might find that their hopes made a lot of sense.

### **The Messianic Promise: Why Do We Have These Expectations?**

#### *Old Testament Prophecies*

Here are some ideas from the Old Testament that paint a very different picture of a Messiah than Jesus. While we believe Jesus is the Messiah, many people do not believe he is the Messiah as he doesn't fulfill these criteria. There is a wide range of views regarding Jesus within Judaism, these are just some texts where Jesus looks different than the Messiah. We are not looking at these trying to bash Judaism, but simply as a means of examining how Jesus defied expectations

One idea that echoes throughout scripture, is that of the Davidic Dynasty. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 7, Nathan is told to deliver a prophecy to David about the building of the temple, and the establishment of a kingdom. Verse 16 sums up the promise fairly well when it says:

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. 2 Samuel 7:16.

The time where David was ruler over Israel seems to be when they were the most established. They were secure, they did some conquering, and they were able to worship their God. When Israel was exiled, the line of Davidic dynasty ended. In this time of exile, conversations about The Messiah flourished. One of the prophecies was that the line of David would be restored.

Jeremiah 23:5 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

If the Messiah was to restore the line of David, they would have to be a king. They would have to sit on a throne. Jesus did not do this. Furthermore, if someone is declared to be from the line of David, you might imagine that they would be somewhat like David. And as our youth know from our recent Bible series, David was violent, and powerful, and authoritative, amongst many other things.

Biblical texts prophecy many things about what The Messiah was supposed to be, we could spend all day looking at various texts to understand what the expectations were and are for a Messiah. An article from Judaism 101, was very helpful for me, since there are so many prophecies about the Messiah.

They summarize that the elements of the incoming Messiah are “ingathering of the exiles; restoration of the religious courts of justice; an end of wickedness, sin and heresy; reward to the righteous; rebuilding of Jerusalem; restoration of the line of King David; and restoration of Temple service”. To achieve these things, it seems rational that the Messiah would have to be powerful, and likely violent. How are these goals going to be achieved without a fight breaking out. The messiah certainly wouldn’t be crucified.

### *The Book of Revelation*

We shouldn’t look at those expectations and scoff. They made sense. Jesus contradicted these messianic expectations. The people of his day were not the only ones who hoped for a liberating, militant leader. The Book of Revelation was written many years after Jesus’ death. It was also written in a time of persecution. Christians exhausted from being persecuted gravitated to this apocalyptic book about a future hope in Christ. Revelation is also full of militant and violent language. The downtrodden perhaps justifiably hoped that a savior would come and vanquish their enemies. Here is one excerpt from Revelation:

Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand!( Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, “Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped... So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about one thousand six hundred stadia.

Revelation 14:14-16; 19-20

Blood flowing from a winepress is a haunting image. Like Jewish folks before Jesus, the Christian folks after him also anticipated a messiah with military might, who would become a king and rule.

### *Hope in Violence and Power is Still Prominent*

We are not so different from these groups 2 000 years ago. Our world today still hopes for a savior. One who will implement a just and holy rule for us. I believe a beautiful and holy world is part of God's plan. But scripture is routinely used in promotional materials for the military. The Bible is often used to justify the conquering of other lands. Violence for the sake of expansion or seizure of resources is routinely marketed as violence to defend morality. When people anticipated Jesus would be a king who would reclaim Israel, they had plenty of passages that supported this idea. Christians who prophesied about Jesus' violent reckoning at the apocalypse were not crazy- they were building on a long tradition. It is not that hard to take the Bible, and use it to support war.

I love the Bible and I love Jesus, and so if it sounds like I am just here to bash scripture that is not where I am going. As anabaptists, we believe that Jesus writes a new story. That Jesus embodies all of these prophecies and ideas. But not the way that we imagine. His crucifixion and triumphal entry proclaim that Jesus contradicts what we want him to be.

### Jesus Writes A New Story

#### *Jesus' Entrance: Roman Rulers vs Jesus' Love*

Jesus' grand entrance into Jerusalem is a mirror of how Roman rulers would return from victory. Consider this description of Romulus, the founder of Rome and his entrance into the city after a brutal victory.

"Romulus himself came last in the procession, dressed in a purple robe and wearing a crown of laurel upon his head, and, so he might maintain his royal dignity, riding in a chariot drawn by four horses. The rest of the army, infantry and cavalry, followed organized by divisions, praising the gods in Roman songs and praising their general in improvised verses. Citizens with their wives and children came out to meet them and stood on each side of the road, congratulating them upon their victory and expressed their welcome every way they could."

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 34

In the synoptic gospels, after his Palm Sunday entrance, Jesus' next action is to go and clear the temple. Romulus' first stop after his parade was also to the temple to offer sacrifices to his gods. As noted in the quote earlier, Romulus was the last in the procession. What was ahead of him? Carts of plunder from his slain enemies. In many

cases captured generals of the opposing army were paraded through the streets ahead of the Roman conqueror to humiliate them.

While there are a lot of differences between Jesus' procession and this one, there are enough similarities to see that he is alluding to these parades. Jesus takes something, and doesn't just do it for his people. He redefines, and reinvents what it means. Jesus declares himself different from Roman victors, with values and actions completely separate from the empire. He is not just a Jewish version of an emperor or soldier- he writes a new story for God's nation. A new way of being.

### *Jesus' Love : Pax Romana vs Sacrifice for Peace*

In the passages read this morning, we did not just hear about Jesus' triumphal entry. We also got a glimpse at Good Friday, and the suffering and sacrifice that awaits Jesus after his parade. In his entrance, he contrasts Roman victors. In his suffering, he highlights the frailty of Roman peace. In Rome, there was a concept called Pax Romana. Which means the peace of Rome. Pax Romana was the idea that the Roman empire was a peaceful empire. It was a principle that the people heard about, and that the government enforced. The Pax Romana however was not peace. Sure, it sought to rid the empire of insurrections, Civil Wars, and ultimately keep the peace within their ever expanding borders. But the Peace of Rome, was not built on peace, equality and justice. It was built on brutality, military might, cruelty and suppression. Jesus' death on the cross, was because of the Pax Romana. People who had large followings, or potential for an insurrection were dealt with cruelly and publicly- to warn people to stay in line, or die. While Rome's kingdom relied on executing Jesus, the kingdom of Jesus has continued years later, centered around this selfless sacrifice. Jesus following his message of peace, even when it led him to death, contrasts the Pax Romana. True peace comes from selfless actions of love, not weapons.

### In Our World

#### *Reading the Bible as a Book of Love*

Scripture is rather confusing. Objectively speaking, the Bible is a violent book. How have we wound up as non-violent believers? How do we wrestle with the book of Revelation, and ancient prophecies that describe a restoration of a nation through force? It can be very challenging, and there is a lot to ponder, which gives me some level of job security. I think Jesus' unique procession into Jerusalem gives us a good hint about how we can approach the Bible. As Anabaptists, reading the Bible through the lens of Christ is one of our core beliefs. In doing so, we are able to do what Jesus does. We are able to center our hopeful expectations on love and not power. Jesus reinterprets what Kingdom of God means. Earthly kingdoms are built on some level of

violence and exploitation. Jesus declares a kingdom that is not bound to a region, but is bound to the principles of hope and love. Jesus redefines what it means to be the Messiah. Focusing his message on the prophecies of freedom, instead of victory. Jesus transforms how we look at scripture.

We come to this complicated book. A complicated book that has confusing passages about both peace and war, generosity and land theft, oppression and liberation. When we look at it with Jesus as the centerpiece, it is a book of love. It motivates us not to colonize, and dominate. Not to chase power and glory. Jesus centers his messianic mission on helping others, not restoring a nation to power. He sums this up well, when he quotes one of these Messianic prophecies in Luke 4:18-19.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Jesus in his unique and perhaps contradicting way of being helps us to truly see the Bible, as the Book of Love.

### *Putting Hope in Jesus- Not Power*

The message of our world is similar to that of Pax Romana. Peace can be achieved, but only through violence and victory.

*“If we just bomb this country then things will be okay.”*

*“Once we eliminate this enemy, everyone will be safe”*

*“If we partner with this military superpower, we will have nothing to fear.”*

*“Civilian casualties are unfortunate, but war is for the greater good of peace and safety.”*

We hear these messages constantly. From powers that we despise, and the ones in charge of us, who we despise a little less. Jesus calls us to keep our hope rooted in love. This sometimes feels crazy, and irrational, but the lasting and transformative power of the cross is our proof. May we keep reassessing our views and hopes, so that we are aligned in love. Willing to see Jesus defy our expectations, as he did in his

triumphal entry. May we root our hope not in the Pax Romana of today, but in the revolutionary power of laying ourselves down, to help our neighbour.

*Example: Hope in the Children, Not the Rulers- Book of Love Video*

We talk a lot about the hope that we have in Jesus. This can feel a bit abstract, or too big to comprehend. When hope is hard to find, it is easier to misplace our hope in the world. If it is okay, I would like to share a video I watched this week that gave me hope. That inspired my sermon. I watched it late at night on a day off, and immediately rushed to my computer to write down the sermon ideas that were coming to mind after seeing this video. It is the music video for a recent cover of the song The Book of Love. Olivia Rodrigo released this cover, as part of a charity album to raise funds for children living in conflict. The video was recorded entirely by children living in countries with a lot of conflict. I found myself weeping watching this video as I thought about the hope and resilience of humans, especially children.

*Watch Video*

Join me in closing prayer: Jesus, you call us to a new way of hoping. You entered Jerusalem as a king unlike all others. You enter our lives to transform us in great ways. Help us to go from here placing our hope in the love of children, instead of the power of nations. Let us keep sharing hope, and keep reading The Book of Love.

### **Works Cited**

<https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/spectaclesintheromanworldsourcebook/chapter/the-roman-triumph/>

<https://store.warchild.org.uk/collections/help2-homepage>

<https://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm>