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Revelation 1:4-5

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KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS

Today is Palm Sunday, the sixth Sunday in Lent. There are two very different aspects to this day in the liturgical calendar. Firstly, it is Palm Sunday, when we celebrate the so-called Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The children with their palm branches have helped us celebrate the coming of Jesus to his people. But there is another aspect to this day, for it marks the commencement of Holy Week. Holy Week ends on Easter Sunday, but the joyful celebration of the resurrection comes only after somber reflection upon the passion or suffering of Jesus. As a technical term the Passion comprises the events of the last twenty hours or so of Jesus' life: his agony in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal and arrest, his trial before Jewish and Roman authorities, and his crucifixion, ending with his death at the ninth hour (3 p.m.) on the Friday. On Palm Sunday we look ahead and remember that this Jesus who entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds would soon be rejected, and would suffer and die.

On Palm Sunday we usually direct our attention to the gospel narratives of the triumphal entry, but I want to direct your attention to the Book of Revelation. The theme of the kingship of Jesus is introduced at the beginning of the book. Among other things, Revelation is a letter written by John to seven churches in the province of Asia. After a brief introduction (1:1-3) the letter commences in the standard first-century way, identifying the author and the recipients, followed by a greeting. Most New Testament letters begin with the greeting, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." John's greeting is different:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (Rev 1:4b-5a NIV)

This greeting is different in two respects. Firstly, it is the only greeting that is Trinitarian, including the Spirit together with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, it elaborates on the identity of Father and Son. Instead of "God our Father" it is "him who is, and who was, and who is to come." Instead of "the Lord Jesus Christ," it is "Jesus Christ... the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." The three titles here used of Jesus are central to the message of the Book of Revelation. They are also particularly appropriate for us to consider on Palm Sunday.

The faithful witness

Jesus is the faithful witness. Witness is a central theme in John's Revelation. It is also a central theme in John's gospel. Many of you have seen Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. One of the criticisms made of that movie is that it does not explain why Jesus suffered and died. This seeming shortcoming is understandable for, as the title implies, Gibson restricts his movie to the Passion, which commences in Gethsemane. We all know that Jesus died for our sins, but what was it that caused the Jewish leaders to arrest him and condemn him to death? In short, Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death because of his witness, his testimony. The specific charge was blasphemy, that he was saying things about himself and God that were inappropriate for a mere mortal.

In his life and ministry Jesus played numerous roles. He entered Jerusalem as Israel's prophet, priest and king. Jesus was God's prophet to his people Israel. The prophet mediated God's word to his people. Moses had brought the Lord's word to his people and had promised that the Lord would send another prophet (Deut 18:15-20). Although the Lord sent many prophets to his people, it was clear that none of these was that promised prophet. But when Jesus came, the sorts of things he said and did led the people to question whether he might not be this promised prophet. Jesus came, announcing that he had been sent from God to do the work given him by God. The Jewish leaders wanted to know on whose authority he said these things. John's gospel twice gives us Jesus' answer to these critics (John 5, 8). The Law stipulated that "the testimony of two men is valid" (John 8:17). Jesus cited multiple witnesses supporting his claim that he was sent from God: John the Baptist, Jesus' own works, and even the Father himself.

The Old Testament prophets confronted Israel and Judah with their sin, warned of impending judgment, called them to repentance, and promised salvation the other side of judgment. But the leaders of Israel and Judah had a long history of rejecting the prophets, even putting them to death. As Jesus entered Jerusalem he knew that earlier prophets had been killed in Jerusalem (Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51). He knew that the same fate awaited him, that he would be rejected and killed.

Jesus entered Jerusalem also as Israel's king. His immediate reason for going to Jerusalem was to celebrate Passover, joining a large number of pilgrims who were obeying the Lord's command to gather at the central place of worship to celebrate the festival in the Lord's presence. How much did the crowd

understand about the symbolic message of Jesus' presence among them? Jesus entered the city on a donkey, fulfilling Old Testament prophecy concerning the manner in which Zion's king would arrive (Zech 9:9). As he rode in from Bethany, the crowds laid their cloaks and palm branches in the road in front of him. Nine centuries earlier the Israelites had acclaimed Jehu as their new king by spreading their cloaks under him (2 Kgs 9:13). Now one greater than Jehu was here.

At Passover it was customary for the pilgrims to sing from the Passover hymnbook, Psalms 113-118, known as the *Hallel* (Praise). The gospels record their song from Psalm 118, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt 21:9; cf. Ps 118:26). This verse is rich in irony. "Hosanna!" they cried. The Hebrew *Hoshia-na*, used in Psalm 118, literally means "save, please," but it came to be a generic exclamation of praise. Passover was a politically charged occasion. The Jews were eagerly expecting the Lord to come and save them. What did they want salvation from? They wanted salvation from Rome, whom they had defined as the enemy. The one who would lead them in this would be the king, the Messiah, the son of David. As they sang Hosanna, did they understand that their Messiah was in their midst? As they sang, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," did they know that the Lord had come in their midst in the person of Jesus, that he was the Lord's agent to bring judgment upon his enemies and salvation for his people? The gospel writers certainly want us to see the irony.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem he went directly to the temple, just like all the other pilgrims. But when he got there he did something unexpected. Towering above the far wall of the Temple was the Antonia Fortress, home to a garrison of the hated Roman troops. These troops would have been on heightened alert. At Passover the Jews remembered God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt, and longed that he would again come to deliver his people from their present slavery to Rome. But Jesus didn't throw the Romans out. Instead he threw out the Jewish moneychangers, denouncing them with the words of the Old Testament prophets, "My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers" (Matt 21:13; cf. Isa 56:7; Jer 7:11). This cleansing of the Temple was both a prophetic and a kingly action. As God's prophet, Jesus was testifying against his people, confronting them with their sin and pronouncing God's judgment. The Temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations, the place where Jew and Gentile alike could come and find God. But in reality, not only were the Jewish authorities keeping the Gentiles from finding God in the Temple, they were also keeping their own people from God. The Temple had become a den of robbers. The Greek term *lēstai*, weakly translated "robbers," implies not simple thievery but violent rebellion. No doubt some in the Temple were plotting rebellion against Rome. But in the eyes of Jesus the prophet, the Temple had become the focal point of rebellion against God.

Jesus not only denounced the Temple, he also set about cleansing it. Under the separation of powers in Israel between prophet, priest and king, the welfare of the temple was the king's responsibility. In cleansing the Temple Jesus was thus making an implicit claim that he was Israel's true king.

Throughout the next few days in Jerusalem Jesus continued to testify that he was sent from God to speak in the name of God, pronouncing judgment and calling to repentance. He urged the people to "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matt 22:21). His curse of the fig tree was a prophetic denouncement of the Temple; the immediate withering of the fig tree testified that Jesus had divine authority to pronounce judgment (Mark 11:12-25). The Jewish leaders understood Jesus clearly enough; they realized that his witness was against them (Matt 21:45). It is no wonder that they plotted together to arrest Jesus and put him to death (Matt 26:3-4).

The account of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus is rich in irony. The Jewish authorities sent a large party of armed men to arrest Jesus, as if he were a dangerous rebel (*lēstēs*, Matt 26:55). They needed the testimony of two witnesses to condemn him, but they had difficulty finding two whose testimony agreed, whereas Jesus had provided multiple witnesses to his own testimony. Finally Jesus was condemned on the charge of blasphemy. But the Jewish leaders did not have the authority to execute capital punishment. So great was their zeal to reject Jesus that they entered into an unholy alliance with the Roman authorities to put Jesus to death. The crowd that just a few days earlier had cried, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" now cried, "Crucify!" while calling for the release of Barabbas, the rebel (*lēstēs*, John 18:40). "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests told Pilate (John 19:15). With that statement the game was up. Their rebellion against God was complete. The Jewish leaders had thrown in their lot with the Romans. In unholy alliance together they put Jesus to death. The formal charge, written on a board fastened above Jesus' head, read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt 27:37). He was the king, but he had been rejected. Jesus the prophet had called on Israel to turn from its rebellion against God, but now the true prophet was crucified between two rebels (*lēstai*) and in the place of a third rebel (*lēstēs*), Barabbas.

Jesus was put to death because he was a faithful witness. Sent by God to his people as prophet and king, he was rejected by them. But as Jesus was dying on the cross, two people believed his testimony: one of the Jewish rebels (*lēstai*) crucified beside him (Luke 23:40-43), and a Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion (Matt 27:54). Jewish revolutionary and Roman soldier ceased their rebellion and identified themselves with Jesus.

Firstborn from the dead

When Jesus died on the cross, it looked as though he had been conquered. The disciples and the women were devastated. In great sorrow they took the body down and laid it in the grave. Who can fathom the depth of their despair? They had followed Jesus, but now their leader was dead. How could this be? Through two nights and a day they waited. The next morning, Sunday morning, the women went to the tomb to care for the body, but they found an empty tomb.

Next Sunday we will celebrate the resurrection. God raised Jesus from the grave, thereby vindicating his witness. During his ministry, Jesus had raised dead people back to life, but this life was of the same order as their life before death; they would in due course face death again. It was not so with Jesus. God raised him not to the same order of life, but to a new order of life beyond the grave. The resurrection showed that Jesus' fight was not against the Romans or even against the Jewish leaders, but against the greater enemies of death and its master, Satan. Jesus, who seemed to have been conquered, emerged from the grave as the conqueror.

Jesus is heralded as the firstborn from the dead, meaning that others will follow in his footsteps to new life beyond the grave. It also means that he has preeminence over all who rise from the dead.

The ruler of the kings of the earth

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus was taken up to heaven, where he took his seat at God's right hand. God the Father has appointed him as king over his kingdom. The eternal Son who had shared the Father's glory from before the beginning of time, who had taken upon himself human nature, now reigns as king over God's kingdom the Church. He is also the ruler over those who are in rebellion against him. One such group in Revelation is "the kings of the earth." He is their ruler because he is King of kings and Lord of lords. Every knee will one day bow and acknowledge his lordship.

Revelation presents Jesus as the faithful witness. For that faithful witness he was put to death by God's enemies who are in rebellion against him. In being killed it seemed that Christ was conquered. But the one who was once dead is now alive. The one who seemingly was conquered has emerged the conqueror. Victorious, he is now ruler over all as King of kings and Lord of lords. The starkly juxtaposed images of the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb are central to the message of the book. Revelation shows a world in rebellion against God. Even Jerusalem is in rebellion against him. How does God put this right? His judgments upon a rebellious world restrain and ultimately eliminate evil, but they don't accomplish salvation. If judgment against evil were all there were, the New Jerusalem would have no inhabitants. Salvation is accomplished through the slaying of the Lamb. Victory is won by the death and resurrection of the faithful witness who gave himself, so that through his blood we might become God's people. Palm

Sunday is a day to reflect upon this. The one who entered Jerusalem as God's faithful prophetic witness was headed to the cross. His path to the throne was not that of a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but the path through Gethsemane, Golgotha and the garden tomb. The real triumphal entry came forty days later when he re-entered heaven and took his seat at his Father's right hand.

Following in Jesus' footsteps

Jesus entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds, but the crowd proved fickle. Days later they cried, "Crucify!" But at the cross two enemies submitted to Jesus: the Jewish rebel and the Roman soldier. Revelation calls us to follow Jesus. He is the archetype, the prototype for our life. The redeemed "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev 14:4). Just as Jesus was the faithful witness, so his followers are called to be faithful witnesses. It is likely that, like Jesus, they will be killed for that witness. Already Antipas, Jesus' faithful witness in Pergamum, had been killed for his faith (2:13). The two witnesses in chapter 11 will be killed for their prophetic witness (11:7). The rebellious world will gloat over their death. It will seem that the beast has conquered them. But death is not the end. The faithful witnesses who bear the seal of the Lamb will follow him through death into new life. In that new life they will reign with Christ. I don't know what that reign is going to look like, but the general principle is clear: the Lamb's people follow the Lamb. He is the faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth. His followers are called to be faithful witnesses, they will rise from the dead, and will reign with him.

The word martyr (*martyr*) originally meant witness. At the end of the first century, when Revelation was written, it still meant this. But in the next two centuries so many Christians were killed for their witness that the word acquired its current meaning. In the second and third centuries the Church grew mightily because of the testimony of those many martyrs.

We don't face martyrdom today in the West. It is sobering that of the seven churches addressed in Revelation the two healthiest are the two which are suffering, Smyrna and Philadelphia. The other five churches have compromised their witness in one way or another. Ephesus and Sardis have lost their passion; Pergamum and Thyatira have compromised with the surrounding world; Laodicea has become so self-sufficient that it has forgotten its need for Jesus. Each of these five has taken their eyes off Jesus.

Here is the mystery at the heart of the gospel. How did Jesus Christ conquer? He conquered by being a faithful witness even unto death. It seemed that he had been conquered, but he rose victorious. How do the saints conquer? They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They conquer by being faithful witnesses even unto death. In death it seems they have been defeated, but they follow Christ through death into new life.

They conquer through the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of Jesus.

In two weeks time we will have a baptismal service. Baptism is a sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible reality. The visible sign is simple: one goes down into the water and comes back up. The reality it represents is that we follow Jesus in his death and resurrection. In a few minutes we will come to the communion table. Communion is also a sacrament. The visible sign is again simple, even trivial: we eat a morsel broken from a matzo cracker, and we drink a thimbleful of grape juice from a cheap plastic cup. The reality it represents is profound. Having in baptism already identified ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, we now express our ongoing identification with him. Immediately before the Passion began, Jesus ate a final meal, a Passover meal, with his disciples. The Passover meal was eaten but once a year. But right from the start, the church broke bread together every week. The early believers immediately understood that the symbolic act of together eating the bread and drinking the wine expressed their identity as Christ's people, as followers of the Lamb who gave his body to be broken and his blood to be shed. We come to the table to be nourished, for it is through the broken body and shed blood of the Lamb that we have life. Furthermore, in eating the bread and drinking the cup we proclaim Christ's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26); we bear witness that it is the slain Lamb who has conquered and is now King of kings and Lord of lords.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:5b-6)

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