

A TRUE AND RIGHTFUL KING

*Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation;
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

....

*He will speak peace to the nations;
And His dominion will be from sea to sea,
And from the river to the ends of the earth.*

Zechariah 9:9-10

Thus reads the prophecy of Zechariah. Some of you read or watch fantasy enough to identify with how much impact prophecy can have on a people. J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and J.K. Rowling bring much added suspense and power to their stories by the use of “prophecy” – patterned of course on biblical foundations. Why is it, by the way, that in order to write great fantasy, you have to use your initials instead of proper names?

In any case, without prophecy, life is bleak indeed. What are we living for? Where is the hope and purpose? The light of revelation can be blinding, but it is not like the blindness of a whiteout. It leads and guides us to places we did not know existed before. But as always, the questions remain: Who are the true prophets, and which are the authentic prophecies? Apart from the Spirit of God, there are no true prophecies. And humans are quite capable of pretending – of making up things just to ease the boredom or the terror. Does God ever truly guide us? Are there hints and signs and hidden things revealed from time to time, at least enough that we take new bearings and head in new directions? All meaningful life believes so. But that does not make it so.

Are there any prophecies in your own personal life? “As above – so below.” One of the secrets of life is the discovery that themes and principles which are operative on the grand scale are also operative on the tiniest and most individual levels. Gravity is at work in the solar system’s vast spaces, but it is also working on anything we can see in a

microscope, and everywhere in between. The dynamics of a kindergarten-level playground argument are not very different from a company squabble, or the problems that plague the United Nations.

If there are prophecies guiding or misleading whole cultures and peoples, there are also prophecies guiding or misleading families and individuals. The prophecies operate as long as we believe them. The true prophecies operate whether we believe them or not.

You are aware, I hope, that some prophecies trace back to Satan, or at least they are satanic: “You will never amount to anything.” “You are ugly.” “You aren’t very bright.” “This marriage will never last.” Sometimes we have to ferret out the false prophecies and banish them from our lives. My own marriage completes its fiftieth-seventh year this June. My mother knew it was a mistake. My father was worried. Mariana’s parents were equally or more appalled. My parents finally persuaded us to get some psychological tests and counseling. (At the time, I was a psych major at the University of Redlands.) Dr. Gregory gave us several personality-inventory tests and, by the time we met for our appointment, he assumed from the results that this was a fancy way for one or both of us to dump the other. We were interesting people, he said, but not for each other. There was wisdom and caring in all these moves and evaluations. That is, they were not “wrong” *per se*. They were just missing a few items that do not show up on tests or on parental radar screens. I know some people who still cannot believe that Mariana has stayed with me. Some days I am one of them.

What are the prophecies around your own personal life – especially the good ones, the ones that speak about your purpose and destiny? We cannot make up authentic prophecy, but we can decide to cooperate or ignore them. We do have free will. Hordes of people miss their destiny because they ignore it, turn away, or get so involved in other things that they never give it a chance.

In any case, how do you decide which prophecies to pay attention to? They are all around us. Some are of doom: the ecology is ruined; the planet is warming; the economy will soon crash; hordes from the East will overwhelm us; water is polluted; terrorists will eventually break through; overpopulation, with its growing chaos, will soon destroy all quality of life on earth. There is nothing unbelievable about any of these prophecies. It’s not terribly comforting, but we *are* still here, yet we have been hearing messages of utter doom and destruction for as far back as human records go. “*Sell all you have and give to the poor*” is insane,

unless you are an individual with a particular hang-up about wealth – or unless you are certain that the world really is coming to an end in the next few weeks.

More comforting, I suppose, is the realization that all these prophecies of disaster cannot be true. There is neither time nor space for all of them. As Yogi Berra said, “Nobody can have everything. Where would they put it?”

There are prophecies of doom and there are also prophecies of a great and shining future: A great king will come. The warring factions will be united. A day of justice and charity and compassion for the weak and poor will be ushered in. We will live in an age of prosperity and cooperation beyond anything we have ever known before. And Camelot will sparkle in the sun because King Arthur has come. Oh yes, the sword in the stone is only a thinly disguised slingshot, and Camelot is only a thinly disguised Jerusalem – the Jerusalem that David captured and made his capital.

But the covenant was not kept and the destiny would not hold, and finally – despite remarkable moments of renewal and faithfulness – Jerusalem, like Camelot, was destroyed by evil forces from within and without. The kingdom of Arthur – alias David ben Jesse – fell. But in time, new prophecies arose. A new King would come – one of direct descent from David – yet He would be even greater than David. And His Kingdom would never fail or fall.

It brings tears to our eyes if we believe it. It brings light and hope back into life. And the truth is – except for a few individuals who may be experiencing a little temporal prosperity at the moment – without this prophecy in some guise or another, life on earth is bleak and pointless in the extreme. The questions still remain: Is such a prophecy from God? Or is all prophecy contrived by humans, and merely poetic versions of our wishful thinking?

Believing in God is not as easy as some people make it sound. If we believe in God, we know there is guidance and purpose. It becomes our quest to find our true destiny – to, in some manner, perceive it. And to whatever degree we find it, we are automatically committed to follow it, to cooperate with it, to help bring it into being. Religion that is not trying to find and follow a Path – a WAY different from the ways of our world – is useless. It is false; it is pretense; it is only for outward show, or for bilking money out of the gullible.

Some people do not like the word “king.” For the very reasons they do not like it, we must keep it. To a true king we owe allegiance. I would say “total allegiance,” but that is redundant; allegiance is allegiance. To a false king, we owe rebellion and defiance. But to a true king, we owe allegiance. A true king is no president. You do not elect him; you recognize him. And if you recognize him, then you proclaim him, regardless of consequences. You do not merely cooperate with him or cheer when you like what he does. You owe allegiance. Allegiance is how the kingdom matches the king. Without allegiance, the kingdom will fall and the king will die.

All of this we learned from Palm Sunday, and from a rooster’s cry. When I was a boy, we heard the rooster’s cry every morning. It was to remind us to never forget, at least not for one more day. Whenever we forget, we have to take the class over again. So far, the history of the world is about taking the class over and over again. Allegiance to Jesus Christ on the part of most of His followers is tentative, haphazard, and unfocused. I hope it is not so for you.

But how are you doing with prophecy? Is there any prophetic vision that lights and guides your life? And I must repeat: Prophecy cannot simply guide or light the destiny of the nation or of the world. To have any real impact, the prophecy must also be connected to a smaller prophecy which connects you personally to the larger prophecy. That is, you have to feel part of it, or you are only a bystander watching from afar. Peter is part of the great spiritual revival movement started by John the Baptist. But it is all vague and general for him until the day the new leader of that movement says to him, “*Follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men.*” Peter can be faithful to his own individual calling for a million years and it will never create the Kingdom. Nevertheless, from the moment of that calling onward, Peter is part of the coming Kingdom. He is connected. And his life is continually changing to match that connection.

To belabor the point, Paul is opposed to the whole affair; he is connected for that reason, but as an antagonist. Truly he does not understand what is going on or what is at stake until his personal vision on the Damascus Road. That is, Paul comes into alignment with the prophecy when a smaller and personal prophecy reveals his identity and purpose as an apostle to the Gentiles. Prophecy is just theory until it becomes personal. A lot of religion (and spirituality) in our time is just theory. Theory never saved anybody. Theory is just a game – even an avoidance – until we discover a personal connection to the prophecy.

If this is starting to sound grim in any way, please remember that the overriding theme of Palm Sunday is a great rejoicing: Get the roads ready. All things will be made straight. Crooked is no fun (if you follow the imagery). And we will get straightened too, which is always worth a scream or two. Nevertheless, things right, things true, things according to the true spirit within – that is always for rejoicing. I don't know if the church still rejoices when a sinner finds Jesus and starts living a new WAY. But I know that in AA, the fellowship truly rejoices when an alcoholic comes into the program and stops drinking and/or drugging. It may be a difficult road ahead. That is guaranteed, in fact. But the light and the hope are back. Step-by-step it will lead to life, and a lost identity and purpose will be found again. Not suddenly, but inevitably. Is that not cause for rejoicing? What causes *you* to rejoice?

Would you rejoice if you found a new King – a new leader far better than any of the ones you have known or tried to follow so far? Why have *any* leader? That is the American myth, it seems: We don't really need a leader. We should be in charge of our own lives. We can go our own way. We can live the lives we want. It doesn't matter what the leaders say or do. In fact, the main reason for leaders is so we will have somebody to complain about and to defy and depose. We can build a strong community by impeaching the leaders. And some people really do enjoy and live for the times they can bring somebody down.

I do understand that challenging evil leadership is sometimes necessary. *“Be it known to you, O king, that we will not worship the golden image which you have set up.”* (Daniel 3:18) So we struggle between finding fault with every imperfection and trying to pretend that our leaders don't really impact our lives very much. Yet bad leaders wreck our lives. That is why the thought of a true and rightful King is so overwhelming. And sometimes we just want to go off into a corner somewhere and pretend that it doesn't matter what the leaders say or do. For a while, it may even seem to be so. It seemed that way to a lot of farmers in September of 1941. And to a lot of Polish Jews in the year I was born. And to a lot of New Yorkers in August of 2001. If we just leave the world alone, maybe it will leave us alone. And maybe not. On the other hand, if we try to fix the world, our whole lives will be swallowed up in the increasing mayhem of efforts to right all the wrongs and reverse all the deadly trends.

Do you ever wish a true and rightful King would come, one who would coordinate all our efforts, get us all on the same page, and never use his power to line pockets, play favorites, or become corrupt himself just about the time we have decided to trust him?

Rejoice! Your King has come! Only, He comes with a few wrinkles we did not expect – with subtleties we are still trying to unravel and get used to. The prophecies are too uncanny to be false, yet not quite the way we pictured them or wanted them. And Jesus Himself is the One who reads them all in newness, adjusting them until the vision comes into focus in ways we never could have imagined.

The true King comes humble. Zechariah had somehow already picked that up, but beyond all imagining. The true King comes humble – that is, obedient to God and never coercing anybody. Well, that's the pits! We are glad He does not coerce us, but what about all those other people who really need coercing? Nevertheless, that is His rule and we cannot change it. We each have to want His Kingship or we cannot have it. Zechariah never dreamed the full extent of the newness of the true King. He envisioned a king who would solve and resolve the dilemmas and paradoxes of this broken world. He had not come to terms with the limitations of the purely physical world. Until Jesus, nobody had. Well, that's not quite true. The few others who had, simply wanted to abandon the world. To them, there was nothing here of worth. They were willing to abandon all individuality and all relationships to get out of this realm. Jesus thinks the world is wonderful because it comes from God, but that it is in bondage to forces and people who do not love or obey God. We must stay in the world but love God beyond all things in this world. To simply abandon the world is to miss all the ways the physical realms can reach us and all that they can teach us. Yet staying locked in to the usual levels of this realm's coercion and control will prevent us from learning these very lessons.

So Zechariah prophesied the coming of the true and rightful King. He saw the vision – something he could not have done except by revelation from God. Yet he also missed it, which could hardly be a surprise to anyone who struggles with what Jesus reveals, these so many years after Zechariah prophesied. Zechariah envisioned a physical dominion over all the earth. What if Jesus had been that kind of King? A physical ruler who conquered the whole earth? What would have sustained His Kingdom and His rule for all these generations since

the time Tiberius was the Emperor of Rome? What sort of battle do we imagine between Roman legions and followers of Christ, if Jesus had been like the Messiah everybody wanted and expected?

Much as we sometimes mock the power of the Spirit and the power of love, the only battle we can imagine winning against Rome is the one which actually took place. Certainly it looked unbelievable to all the early Christians, yet they fought it as they had been told and taught: by bearing witness to their true King, and by being faithful to Jesus and not to any earthly ruler or power or coercion. And when push came to shove, they were unafraid to die. So Jesus' Kingdom does stretch from sea to sea, but not like Zechariah or anybody else had ever imagined. For all these generations, there have been those who live in but not of the world – who claim a higher allegiance than this world can know or understand. Jesus truly is their King, in every way that really matters. And they live in His Kingdom – whether this world likes it or not, and no matter what this world says or imagines.

So we rejoice. Our true and rightful King has come! And we must not and will not trade Him for anything or anyone on earth.

Those who know it – who truly understand and recognize Him – still sing “*Hosanna!*” Our King has come!