

When God is King

Today, we'll take a break from the series of Old Testament teachings to look at what happens when God is king. A couple of weeks back we took a quick look at the 39 kings of Israel and Judah who followed David's son Solomon. We observed that most of them felt they could do the job without God's help. And they also felt that they didn't even need His approval as they chose actions that showed their preference for the pagan gods of the Canaanite people over the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What was the fruit of the lives of these kings? We saw assassinations within and warfare without. We saw both Israel and later Judah going into exile. We saw a host of personal disasters that fell onto the kings and on their descendants. We saw great evils that became part of their religious life, things like offering their firstborn children to the false gods and Canaan and encouraging others to do the same.

If you grew up with these stories and nothing else, like kids who grew up in the first century might have done, you'd have some opinions. If all you knew directly about rulers and kings was what you knew from the Caesars of Rome or from Herod the King of the Jews, you would certainly have some thoughts about what kings are like. But when God comes as King, everything is so different, so unlike all the trappings that came with the human kings, that you might not recognize Him as King at all. You might miss it.

First of all, when God came to be king, He didn't come with a lot of pomp and circumstance. It wasn't like you couldn't help but notice that the king was here. He came from heaven, yes, but He came as an infant, born to a humble couple who weren't even married yet. Yes, that was awkward. But you can't say that it was an oversight, that God's awkward arrival was just a slipup in the arrangements, because He had been planning this for eternity. He grew up in a town called Nazareth, a small place, a place where nothing very important seemed to happen. Except that Jesus grew up there.

When God came, He left the really important people off the guest list. He didn't invite Herod to Bethlehem, and when Herod found out he ordered that all the children under 2 years of age be slaughtered. He didn't invite the Pharisees or the ruling class of Jews, the Sadducees. He didn't bother to let the Sanhedrin know -- if He had, they might have joined Herod's plot. But God didn't forget to tell the shepherds - in fact, He sent angels to announce His coming to those who were watching flocks by night. And He told His prophets, the aged Anna and Simeon, who faithfully awaited His coming in and around the temple. God told them, "Here I am -- I'm this baby being carried in to the temple by the young girl over there", and Simeon replied, "My eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Anna heard the Lord's voice, too, and walked up to the baby, giving thanks to God for His coming, then telling everyone who was expecting the true King to come to save Jerusalem, that He was finally there. God told of His coming to those who were humble enough to welcome Him, but not to those who were threatened by the presence of a real King.

When God came, He lived as a child in the home of His family. He learned a trade. He was obedient to the will of two beings far less wise and powerful than He was. He showed them respect and they taught Him the Scriptures that He had inspired centuries earlier.

Somehow, and we don't fully know how this is, but He was both fully human and fully divine. It doesn't matter that we can't really understand it -- the people who knew Him, the people who wrote about Him, tell us that this is who He was; the God-man, the Christ, the Saviour.

The kings who came before Him all had palaces. David was even a little embarrassed that he lived in a palace while God's dwelling place, the ark of the covenant, was housed in a tent. But they had palaces and armies and no end of servants to run around looking after them. Listen to these words from the prophet Samuel to the people of Israel after they had asked for a king:

The king will draft your sons into his army and make them run before his chariots. Some will be commanders of his troops while others will be slave laborers. Some will be forced to plow in his fields and harvest his crops, while others will make his weapons and chariot equipment. The king will take your daughters from you and force them to cook and bake and make perfumes for him. He will take away the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his own servants.

And on and on Samuel went describing the fate of the nation under the rule of the kings they so wanted, but they didn't listen. They wanted someone who would be in charge, who would take what he needed from them in order to make the nation run ... and that's what they got.

But when the true King arrived, He didn't live in a palace. In fact, he told one man who wanted to follow Him, that He had no place to lay His head. He didn't have any servants, but He told His followers that He hadn't come to be served, not like their ancient kings, but to serve and to give his own life as a ransom for many. The true King didn't take the homes or the lands or the people, nor did he take their sons and daughters and make them serve Him. He didn't come to get, but to give, and He gave them forgiveness for their sins, healing from their diseases, freedom from the demons that oppressed them, even life to some who had died. The true King was not like the kings who had come before Him ... His purpose was not the same and His method was not the same.

The kings of olden days were kept in power by the strength of those around them. The Scriptures go into quite a lot of detail, for example, about David's mighty men, particularly the 30 warriors who had accomplished great feats in battle and who stood with David to make him king ... and to keep him there. We saw last time how Omri was the choice of the army and how inevitable it was that he should become king instead of, first Zimri, and then Tibni son of Ginath. The decisive factor in all of the politics around who should be king was who had the support of the army.

When the true King arrived He had no army, no strong men, except Peter who managed to cut off someone's ear in defense of the King. The true King was invited to call on the armies of heaven, "For the Scriptures say, 'He orders His angels to protect and guard you, and they will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone.'" But the King who came in the Name of the Lord refused to use the armies of heaven to protect Him from suffering. He didn't come to surround Himself with people who would protect Him, but with people who could learn from Him the way of the cross and who could carry that learning to the ends of the earth.

The kings of Israel and Judah were protectors of the land. They fought with foreign armies that wanted to take their land, and sometimes they paid off huge bribes to get the kings of other lands to leave them alone. Their identity rested in their power over a land and a people, and they would fight to keep it, even if fighting became a way of life. There's a verse in 2 Samuel 11 which suggests to us that the kings would go to war in the spring, after the rainy season was over -- was that an annual event? or merely a common one?

When the true King came, He wasn't so concerned about the land as He was about the hearts of the people. He didn't fight to rid the land of its enemies, but he looked for faith, even in a Roman centurion. He told people to give to Caesar that which belonged to Caesar, but to give to God all that belonged to Him. And He told the man who was about to sentence Him to death that His kingdom was not of this world -- if it had been, his followers would have fought to protect Him. But, no, they didn't fight, they didn't try to protect Him from the Jewish leaders, because His kingdom was from somewhere else. His kingdom was not like the kingdoms of this earth and neither was he a king like the kings of this earth.

So, the true king is unrecognizable. We wouldn't have known Him if we were alive in the day and we, like so many of the Jews, were actually looking for, expectant of, the coming of the King. Some people thought that they knew Him, thought, "It must be Him". And then their belief, their confidence, all fell apart.

I'm struck by the image of Jesus riding on a donkey into the city of Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover Week. He was so clearly fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah:
Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious yet He is humble, riding on a donkey.

They knew the prophecies, and as Jesus rode into the city on the back of a donkey, the crowds shouted, "Bless the King who comes in the Name of the Lord!" A few days later they were shouting, "Crucify Him. Crucify Him!" I wonder what they thought of the prophecies that they had shouted about just a few days earlier. I wonder if they thought, "We must have made a mistake. There must be another one coming who will be a true king, one who the chief priests and teachers of the law approve of, one who will also come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey." They didn't, they could not recognize their King when He came to them, full of love and mercy, full of life and truth. When the King arrived in Bethlehem, most people didn't recognize that He was, truly,

their King. When they killed Him in Jerusalem some 30 years or so later, they still had not recognized who He was.

This is the clear verdict of Scripture. Luke 19:42-44 -- Jesus was approaching Jerusalem and as the city came into view He started to weep and He said this:

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace -- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side ... They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

John, in writing the prologue to his gospel, says this:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him." (1:10,11)

In the book of Acts, Paul is speaking to a crowd gathered in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, recounting the history of Israel to the time of David, then pointing to Jesus as the descendant of David who God had promised -- in other words, the Messiah:

Brothers, children of Abraham and you god-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning Him, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. (13:26,27)

And Paul goes on from there to describe the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of forgiveness of sins for those who believe. The point is that when the King came to visit His people, they didn't know who He was. They had some strong hints, and some of them figured it out, but even those few took awhile to get it. It was a slow, stumbling journey into the light that the apostle John calls "His glory, the glory of the One and only ... full of grace and truth." But, eventually, Peter figured it out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!" Even Thomas got it, although it took seeing the resurrected Jesus to make him say, "My Lord and my God!"

Why was it so hard to see the obvious? This is where it gets tricky, because what seems obvious to us was NOT obvious to very many of the people of Jesus' day. Why was it only shepherds and magi that greeted the newborn king? Why were there only 120 gathered in the upper room after all that Jesus had done for people during His three years of teaching and blessing and helping people?

Paul teaches us about spiritual blindness in his second letter to the church in Corinth. He says that the god of this age has blinded the minds of those who don't believe -- that doesn't mean that they're not responsible, just that he has taken advantage of some resistance on their part. He says that there is a veil over the minds of those who were listening to the words of the law being read, that they had become dull in their thinking and that they had veiled hearts as well. But then, with typical Pauline enthusiasm, he declares that God made His light shine into our hearts, that the veil has been removed, that we are free to see the glory of God in the face of Christ and to be changed by it. This dullness, or darkness, needed a powerful light to overcome it,

and God has provided that light.

There was once a bright star that shone in the eastern sky. It ignited hope and wonderment in some magi from Persia and they followed it, somehow -- how does one follow a star? -- all the way to Bethlehem in Judea. Nobody else seemed to notice it. Nobody else was paying attention to the night sky, or knew how to interpret its signs, because when the magi arrived in Jerusalem and told of the birth of a king, the whole city was stirred up. They didn't know about the birth of a king.

When the true King came, He didn't come to shake hands and make speeches, He didn't come to make a bunch of new laws or negotiate some kind of compromises within the Roman Empire, He didn't come to change structures or to administer a massive bureaucracy. He came to get past all of that external theatre and touch the hearts of people who need to know Him.

He came as a baby, so no one needed to be afraid of Him (although Herod was certainly afraid of the baby from Bethlehem)

He lived simply, in a small town in Galilee. Nothing in that place spoke of pretension or privilege -- it wasn't that sort of town. His life story was like that of most of the people He would meet during His ministry, and so they could relate to Him, could hear what He had to say. "This guy is one of us."

He loved people and He demonstrated that love in many, many different ways, through the miracles of healing and deliverance, through caring for their needs, like feeding the 5,000, and through going to their homes, places where tax-collectors lived, for example; men like Zaccheus and Matthew.

That was another thing. When the true King came, He crossed the social boundaries and talked to a Samaritan woman who had a long history of relational failures. He healed the servant of a Roman centurion, where others would not have been so generous to a man representing the occupying army in Judea.

You honored people when you went to their home and ate a meal with them, and Jesus ate in the homes of Pharisees and tax collectors.

He was the King that most people wanted, humble, loving, righteous, good and kind, truthful and just. If you didn't want that, you were afraid of Him, because truth and justice and goodness were a threat to your way of life. And if you were afraid of Him, then you made excuses for not following Him, for not taking His teaching to heart, for pretending that he was the wrong guy riding the donkey into Jerusalem.

This Christmas, remember that the real King, the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords, has come. He said that His sheep hear His voice and He wants to speak with us. Let's not be counted among the ones who made excuses for not hearing Him, but set aside some peaceful time in the midst of holiday craziness -- time to read His word, to reflect thankfully on His goodness, to talk with Him about your life,

your family, your hopes ... When the real King is present, people want to hear what He has to say. But we may sometimes forget that the first step is to invite His presence -- He will take care of the rest.