

Misunderstood King

Turn with me to Matthew 21. Today is the beginning of what we call Holy Week. It's something Christians have commemorated for thousands of years because it's the focal point of our faith. This week is not just the pinnacle of the Christian calendar, it's the turning point of human history because Easter Sunday is the day that God fully revealed his plan. Up to this point, there was a hint of God's plan, but it was shrouded in mystery, but the story we're looking at today is the day God began to pull back the curtain to allow everything to come into view. [Read Matthew 21:1-10]

Jerusalem was the political and religious capital of Israel. While Israel wasn't an official nation because they were under the authority of the Roman Empire, Jews still considered Jerusalem, not Rome, both their spiritual and political capital. Jerusalem was the city where devout Jews from all over the Roman Empire would converge during the Passover festival the Jews were commanded to celebrate when God brought them out of Egypt. One historian estimated that during the Passover, the population of Jerusalem would swell from 30,000 to about 180,000. It was the Superbowl of the Jews!

But despite the fact that Jerusalem was the religious center of Israel, the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus didn't spend any of his ministry there. Instead, the bulk of his ministry was focused on Galilee, the region to the north of Jerusalem and

there's a reason for this. If Jesus would have done and said in Jerusalem, what he said in Galilee, his ministry wouldn't have lasted three years, it would have lasted about three days. It would have been like Frodo going straight to the gates of Mordor. But he had things he needed to accomplish before he died. So, he stayed north in Galilee.

His ministry there was centered on convincing people that he was the Messiah through signs like healing, driving out demons, teaching about justice and mercy—all things people believed the Messiah would do. But he never outright told them he was the Messiah, that would have been trouble.

In Matthew 16, Jesus took his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, which was a Roman city that was as far north as Jesus ever traveled. It was there Jesus sat down with his disciples and asked them how things are going. His specific question was, **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** This is how Jesus often referred to himself. The disciples told Jesus what they'd heard people saying, *“Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”* And then Jesus asks them, **“But who do you say I am?”**

That's when Peter answered, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** And Jesus answered him, “Peter, this isn't something you came up with on your own, God revealed this to you.” You are Jesus, the Christ.

Some people think that “Christ” is Jesus' last name. They call him Jesus Christ so they don't get him mixed up with Jesus Smith or Jesus Gomez. But Christ isn't a proper

name, it's a title that means "anointed one" or more "anointed King." Jews expected the Messiah to be a king. So, when you say "Jesus Christ", you're saying "Jesus, the King."

When Peter made his declaration, Jesus knew he got his point across.

Then Matthew 16:21 says, **"From that time Jesus' began to show His disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day."** With his mission in Galilee accomplished, Jesus got up, took a deep breath and started the 100-mile trek to Jerusalem, knowing what was waiting when he got there.

When Jesus arrived at Bethpage, a town about a mile outside of Jerusalem, there was a huge crowd there. And the crowd recognized Jesus because many—maybe most of the people in the crowd were from Galilee. So, the crowd who had heard Jesus teach for three years and suspected he might be the Messiah, had a sense that something significant was happening. And when he mounted a donkey to ride into Jerusalem, it reached a fevered pitch because they knew what he was doing.

Have you ever had to meet someone at a coffee shop or airport, but you didn't know what they looked like? What do you do in that situation? Well, if you're picking someone up at the airport, you stand by the baggage claim with a sign that says, "John Smith." Or if you meet a blind date at a restaurant, you'll tell them, "I'll be wearing a red sweater vest" or "I'll have a giant sombrero on." That's a sign that they will recognize.

This is what Jesus did. At the beginning of the passage, Jesus sends his disciples into Jerusalem to get a donkey for him to ride. But he didn't want to ride a donkey because he was tired. He did it as a sign. In verse 5, Matthew quotes a passage that's a combination to two separate Messianic prophecies, Psalm 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. It says, **“Say to the daughter of Zion, Behold your king is coming to you, gentle and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”**

Zechariah and Psalms was the red sweater vest and sombrero that allowed people to recognize Jesus claiming to be the Messiah. It was critical for them to make that connection because from that time on, he knew he wouldn't live up to their expectations. Jesus intentionally staged the scene to signal that he was the Messiah—the king they were expecting. But was he? Well, yes...and no.

He *was* the Messiah, but he was not the kind of king they were expecting. He was a leader, but he wasn't a political or military leader. He displayed power, but not the type of power they expected. That's why it seemed like Jesus' trip to Jerusalem went terribly wrong—I mean, they crucified him. In reality, everything happened just as he intended.

How you would have received Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem depended on your perspective. This is critical to understanding Palm Sunday, because what many people find strange about Easter week is why people would roll out the red carpet for Jesus and

yell Hosanna one day and a few days later, yell “Crucify him!” But, as is usually the case, the picture comes into focus when you understand the history.

You see, we often act like all ancient people were the same. That shouldn’t be a surprise because it’s easy to stereotype people from a group when you don’t know anyone from that group. We all do it. So, we need to understand that the Jews living in Galilee were vastly different than the Jews living in Jerusalem.

Galilee was country, Jerusalem was city. Galileans were middle class, Jerusalem had the very rich and the very poor. Galilee was redneck, Jerusalem was sophisticated and modern. Trump won Galilee by a wide margin while Hillary crushed it in Jerusalem. Galileans revered the Temple but resented the corruption and power. Jerusalem *was* the home of the Jewish ruling elite.

The crowd gathering around Jesus in Bethpage and shouting “Hosanna” were the ones who had been with Jesus the last three years. They were the people he healed, fed, freed from demons, and preached about a new Kingdom where those who were powerless, lost and forgotten were considered greatest in the Kingdom of God. They knew the Old Testament teaching and knew that the great turnaround Jesus was talking about would happen when the Messiah came.

Galilee had been ruled directly by the Romans for years. They were looked down on by both the Romans and the Jerusalem Jews. So, for them, when the Messiah lived

with them in Galilee for three years before going to Jerusalem, this was good news. King Jesus was coming to *set* them *free*.

But it was different for the Jerusalem elite. For them, it made complete sense that the Messiah would come from Jerusalem. They were the educated ones, they were the ones with power. David reigned in Jerusalem. So, this guy from the back woods couldn't be the real Messiah. But since he had such a following, they needed pay attention. In case, like the Maccabees 200 years before, he instigated a revolt. The Jews knew that if that happened, the Romans would come down hard on them and they would lose what little independence they had. While the Galileans viewed Jesus as savior, Jerusalem saw him as a threat. They believed Jesus would *mess* them *up*.

But neither group realized that Jesus came as the king of a different kind of kingdom. Kingdoms usually conquer lands and have political borders, Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world. Usually the coronation is a show of strength, but Jesus came in gentleness. The values of this world are power and wealth. But Jesus' kingdom was one where the first are last, the last are first and the servant is the greatest. Everything that happened from the time he mounted that donkey to the time he was crucified perfectly embodied the kind of Kingdom Jesus was inaugurating—a kingdom like no other.

That's why both the Jews at that time and people today are still baffled by all this talk of Jesus as a king. We think of kings as political and powerful and kingdoms as places

with palaces and armies. And yet, even after this inauguration, there was no kingdom set up. There was even seemingly little change the world. It would be another 300 years before Christians would even be able to escape persecution and achieve any kind of political power. So how could anyone believe Jesus was a king?

Well, we can only say Jesus is king if we recognize the kind of kingdom he rules. The power of this kingdom is not the military, but the Cross. The crown Jesus wore wasn't made of gold, but a crown of thorns. And his kingdom didn't advance with guns, coercion and killing, but through sharing the good news, serving the poor and marginalized and laying down their lives for Jesus. The citizens of this kingdom are known for their humility, generosity and whole-heartedness.

That's why people reacted the way they did. The Galileans were excited because they were looking for a king and a prophet to replace the unresponsive and corrupt Jerusalem leadership and to finally set up a government ruled according to God's laws. This was good news for them.

While the idea of the Messiah might be appealing to the Jerusalem leadership at first because it would mean getting out from under the thumb of Rome, ultimately, they felt threatened because King Jesus would take away their political power and if his movement failed, the entire region would have been decimated. So, if they could put down this Jesus character, they might be able to spare their city.

So, when Jesus was crucified, they would have had different reactions, too. The Galileans would have been devastated. They needed hope, but their hope was crushed. When Jesus was crucified, the elites were relieved. They could hold onto their power and their way of life—at least for a little while longer.

What they didn't know was that by crucifying Jesus, they played right into his hands. His death didn't *weaken* his kingdom, but sent it underground to germinate like a seed until it sprung up. On Easter Sunday, when Jesus came out of the grave, he was vindicated—shown to be not just the king of the *Jews*, but the king of everything. It's impossible to defeat a king who only gets stronger when he dies.

They didn't understand because they had never seen a kingdom like this. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2, **“We declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”** They had no idea the power they were unleashing.

You know, it's easy to criticize the people back then. We often think that if we were in their shoes, we would do things differently. The truth is we're really not that much different than they were. We all have our agenda and it's pretty hard to convince us otherwise. The French philosopher Voltaire once wrote, *“In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since.”* In other

words, we all have a habit of wanting Jesus to conform to our expectations—kind of life this... [Taledega nights prayer]

It's still true that we all have our own expectations of Jesus, but it's also still true that Jesus and his kingdom doesn't conform to what *we* want. The key question is whether or not Jesus is real. If he's not, then we can make him into whatever we want. But if he is, then we shouldn't expect him to conform to what we want. The world doesn't work that way. Jesus is who *he* says he is, but how we respond to King Jesus today also depends on our perspective.

If you're comfortable and in control of your life, you'll likely see Jesus as a threat to your way of life. That usually means you're making decent money at a good, stable job. You're relatively healthy and you have some good leisure time. You might be a good church member with a good reputation. You feel like you're in control and that's the way you like it. In fact, you even recognize that you've been blessed and you're quick to thank God for that. That's a nice place to be.

But it's a dangerous place to be, because that place can make it harder to respond when King Jesus makes demands on us. But that's when we most need to submit to him. If Jesus really is King, then he has that right, which means I'm not in control of my own life. If Jesus is really King that means that what's good isn't what *I* want, but what *he*

wants. It means that how I spend my time and money must conform to what *he* says is good. How I treat other people must conform to what he says is good.

If Jesus is really King, then I have to submit myself to him, even when doing so disrupts up the kingdom I've set up. For my family, the process of moving to Minneapolis after 13 years in Iowa was quite disruptive. I was on a retreat when I knew that God was calling me to move on. I remember getting on Facebook to chat with my wife. I said, "I think God is calling us to move." My wife replied, only half-joking, "*OK, remind God that I have a good job here.*" The truth is, moving was very disruptive to our whole family. We were perfectly happy there.

We knew we were called to leave the life that was so comfortable for us. And yet as hard as it was for us and especially for our children, we've been able to experience God's goodness in it. It was hard, but we always knew we had to obey.

Submitting to Jesus will always seem threatening at first, but when we do things his way, we'll find that God is *good* and his way is *best*.

But there are some of you who know very well that you're not in control of your life. Far from being comfortable, your life is a struggle—you live with physical or emotional pain or regret. You struggle financially. Your relationships are frustrating. And you would love it if you could hand off your problems and they would go away.

But like the Galileans, at first Jesus might disappoint you because he might not fix your situation. You don't always pray and instantly get a job. He doesn't always miraculously heal. Your family struggles may not be fixed. You might not know exactly what to do even when you ask for guidance. I don't know why. I struggled to find away to be able to tell you that God will fix it for you right away, but I can't. I wish I could.

But here's what I know. *I know that getting what we want doesn't always give us what we're looking for.* In Jesus' day, every Jew wanted God to fix their Roman problem. They all believed—they were sure that if God would just get rid of the Romans, everything would be right. But God knew that if he didn't fix their heart problem—their sin problem—first, even when the Romans were out of the picture, they still wouldn't be free. They would still be enslaved to their own sins and desires. As long as people still have free-will and as long as our hearts are in this condition, there will always be struggle.

I've known people who have lived a charmed life and were constantly miserable and I've known people who lived in miserable conditions who experienced a joy that defies any rational explanation. The best seasons of my life have seldom been the easiest.

How does that happen? It happens when we trust in a king and a kingdom that is not of this world. It happens when we don't bet on the pleasures of this world as our source of happiness. When things aren't going the way we want them to go, that's when we need to *trust* that God really is *faithful*.

The question is, how can you trust that God is faithful when you can't see it? Well, we can trust because we know the end of the story. The Bible never promises fairy-tale endings or sit-com resolutions on this earth. But it does give us a glimpse of the future. Jesus suffered just like we do. In fact, he suffered far greater than any of us ever will when he was nailed to a cross. And if that was the end, then we should scratch and claw and fight for every ounce of pleasure we can here.

But that wasn't the end. You see, three days later—on Easter morning, Jesus was resurrected. Why is that important? Because Jesus' Resurrection was proof of his kingship and the guarantee of what's to come for those who believe. And when you know that's your future, it's makes the present much more palatable. In fact, the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, **"¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man."** And in Romans 8:18, **"¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."**

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, God's plan to reveal his kingdom in Jesus Christ was unfolding. And whatever your circumstances here and now, whether good or bad when we submit ourselves to King Jesus and trust him we will find what we're looking for, not just here, but for eternity.