“Mistaken Identity”

Luke 19:29-41

29 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 30 “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

32 Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

34 They replied, “The Lord needs it.”
35 They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. 36 As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

38 “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”[b] “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

40 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42 and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.

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I. Introduction

The day had finally arrived. After three years traveling with his disciples and teaching them about the kingdom of God, Jesus was about to enter into Jerusalem for the last time. From the moment he called the first disciples, he had been steadily revealing God’s plan to all those who would listen. He had been a voice in the wilderness crying out for God’s people to return to their Father’s house, through repentance and faith. He taught that the heart of the Law is love, first of God and then of one another. He taught that greatness comes by way of service. He confirmed that God desires mercy over
sacrifice. He told people to do insane things like loving their enemies and withholding judgment. He challenged them with parables about the Kingdom of God, and confronted their culture by demonstrating how faith and action work hand in hand.

He had also performed many miracles in these last months. He had healed the lame, he had cured lepers, he had restored sight to the blind, he had fed thousands with nothing more than a handful of bread and fish, he had walked on water, he had calmed storms, he had cast out demons with a word, he had raised the dead back to life, and he had even forgiven sins. But one thing more remained for him to do, in order to fulfill his Father’s mission.

II. Jesus was mistaken for a different kind of king

But, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did so knowing that even his most faithful disciples, the twelve, didn’t fully understand what he had come here to do. Even though he had told them several times before what must come to pass, they were unable to comprehend what it would mean. He had told them before that the Son of Man must die and be raised again to life. He had told them that his kingdom was not of this world. But as they approached the city, he sent two ahead to find the colt that he would ride, and they remembered the prophecy of Zechariah: “See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey.” I suspect that, in this moment, the disciples wondered if what Jesus told them was a mistake; that things wouldn’t work out as badly as he said they would. And, as if to confirm their suspicions, the people of the city welcomed him with cries of adoration. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Surely Jesus must be wrong, then. He was entering the city as a hero, not a criminal. Surely, he would restore Israel and rule Jerusalem. Surely things would turn out better than he expected. They couldn’t foresee how
the week would end in Jesus’ death on a cross.

The problem, you see, is that the disciples had mistaken Jesus for the wrong sort of king, and they weren’t the only ones to do so. The Jewish people had developed high expectations for Messiah – who he would be, and what he would do. And, even though Jesus didn’t meet their expectations, they still believed he was the leader they were looking for. So when he entered the city to the fanfare of the crowds, it was because he was entering with a mistaken identity.

1. Some people mistook Jesus for a great military leader from King David’s line. He was from David’s line, for sure, but he came as a shepherd, not a warrior. He came to seek lost sheep, not to fight battles.

2. Some people mistook Jesus for a religious sage, who would rule with earthy wisdom, like Solomon. He did come with wisdom, it’s true, but it was the wisdom of the cross, which Paul tells us is “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:18)”

3. Some, like Judas, mistook Jesus for a rebel, who would use subterfuge to overthrow Caesar. But Jesus openly proclaimed the truth and grace of God’s coming kingdom, casting light on the dark places, not hiding in them.

It seems that each person had his or her own notion of who Jesus really was, and what his arrival at Jerusalem would bring. Even those who didn’t believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah mistook him for someone else. The Pharisees thought he was just a teacher with dangerous ideas, who was encouraging civil unrest by allowing the people to treat him like the King. Israel’s political situation was already bad enough, without this maniac strutting around acting like Caesar. They wanted to protect their way of life, and this Jesus was doing things that would bring trouble down on all of their heads. They wanted Jesus to stop the crowds from chanting his name, suggesting he should control his followers
better.

But there was a common mistake made by all those who were with Jesus as he entered the city that day. Each of them, when they looked at Jesus, mistook him for an earthly king. But Jesus is not an earthly king; he is the King of Kings. His reign is cosmic in scope, and his kingdom will never end. He didn’t come to rule a nation, but to set all nations free. He didn’t come to gain more subjects, but to welcome more daughters and sons to his Father’s house. He didn’t come to win a battle against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities. He didn’t come for his own glory, but for the glory of the Father in Heaven. So, when the Pharisees attempted to quell the crowd, Jesus pointed out that, when the king of the universe passes by all of creation knows it, even if some have chosen to remain blind to it.

Even today, we sometimes mistake Jesus for a different sort of king, don’t we? We see him as little more than a moral example to follow, and we believe that we can earn God’s approval by just doing the sorts of things Jesus did. We see him as gentle Jesus, offering endless love to sinners, but we forget that he is also a holy God, who demands righteousness and a total transformation of our hearts. I wonder how often we fail to remember that this Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, the Creator of all things?

III. We have mistaken ourselves for kings

Our bigger problem, though, is not that we don’t recognize Jesus for who he truly is. At some level I think we all know and understand that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Our real problem is that we fail to honor him as Lord in our lives. The people of Jerusalem wanted to honor Jesus as an earthly king and put him on an earthly throne. We don’t even want to go that far, anymore, let alone invite him to take up
residence as king over our hearts and actions. In fact, too often, we simply dethrone Jesus entirely, because we have mistaken ourselves for kings and queens in his place. We have enthroned our own needs and desires above all else, and we have become a people, who often answer to no one, but our own inner voice.

Now, this may sound a bit melodramatic. I mean, most of us here are faithful followers of Jesus, right? We earnestly seek to become more like him, and we have confessed him as our Lord and Savior. We know from the Bible that we are all sinners, in need of a savior. And we know that Jesus died on the cross in our place as a penalty for our sin. We know that God has promised us that when we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead we will be saved. Doesn’t that make him our king and us his loyal subjects?

Friends, confession is only the first step in Jesus’ coronation as king. It is enough to save us from an eternity in Hell, but it is not sufficient to bring Heaven on earth. You see, like any monarch, Jesus is king whether we acknowledge him or not. Confession simply expresses that truth. But until his sits fully on the throne in our lives, and we begin to do the things he commands, he is not really our king, is he? If his word does not command our allegiance and our action, then he is not really our Lord. So often, many of us settle for a puppet ruler in our lives. We like the Jesus that we can control, who maybe asks us to change a bit, but not so much that it will hurt. We are OK with a ruler who wants us to give up some of our time and money to a good cause, but we draw the line when he asks us to surrender our lives. We are far too comfortable with the kingdoms we have constructed around ourselves that provide us with temporary peace, leisure, and financial security. We don’t want to give these up, because, frankly, they make for a nice place to live. But in Christ we are called to step out of the
comfortable, but ultimately fleeting, kingdoms of this world and into God’s heavenly kingdom that will last. And the only way we can fully make that transition is to step off the throne ourselves, and invite Jesus to take up permanent residence as the one and only Lord in our lives. What we need is the return of the king!

IV. The Return of the King

In the ancient world, whenever Caesar returned to a citadel, the people who lived there under his rule would rush to meet him outside the city gates. They would fall at his feet and begin shouting his praises and victories. “Hail, Caesar!” they would say. And then they would usher the king back into the city, where he would take up residence and assume authority over all the people. Does this sound familiar? That is exactly what the people of Jerusalem were doing with Jesus, because they thought he was there to replace Caesar. But, in order for the people to welcome their king, they first had to take the risk of opening the city gates. This was a risk, because it left them open to attack from the outside, and it meant giving up complete control of the city to their Lord. Every time the gates were thrown open to welcome a ruler there was a real possibility that the wrong kind of sovereign would enter to take the throne. You see, when the king who comes to the city is a wicked king, a pretender, the people always suffer under his rule. But, when the king who comes to the city is a good and wise king, the people always prosper under his care. Only under the authority of a genuine king can people experience true peace and fulfillment. Likewise, we will only experience peace and restoration when we return the one true King to his rightful place in our lives.

So, like a city in the ancient world, we need to be sure about the character of the king we are inviting to take residence on
the throne in our lives. There was once a great preacher named S. M. Lockridge, who delivered a sermon with the aim of answering the question of who King Jesus really is, and I would like for us to hear a bit of that now.

V. Application

That’s my king, and he is worthy! Jesus is the only king I want to welcome into my life. He is the only one I trust enough to open up the gates of my heart. But, despite the fact that I have asked Jesus to be the King of my life, and seek to follow him faithfully, I have a confession to make. Sometimes, I still allow a pretender to sit on the King’s throne. In fact, I allowed it to happen this week. His name is Pride, but he masquerades as self-sufficiency. You see, I convinced myself this week that I could handle everything on my plate by myself, even though I knew the week would be shorter, because
of spring break. I convinced myself that, even with folks I depend on being out of town for vacation, business, or family responsibilities, I would be just fine. I can cover for everyone, no problem. I’ve got this. And pride let me go on thinking that, even as I began to run out of time to complete the work at hand, even as I struggles to maintain the energy I needed, even as I began to cut corners in my devotional life. Self-sufficiency would have allowed me to run myself into the ground in an inglorious fashion, because Pride is a terrible ruler to place on the throne. Have you ever found yourself in a situation like this, where, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, you still believed you could handle everything alone, until you finally reached the point of collapse?

I was headed there this week. Those of you who follow my writing on the Internet read about it in an article I posted on my website, and from the number of views it received I can assume that I am not the only one who was struggling with the lie of self-reliance this week. But then I read the words of Jeremiah 3:15 yesterday, and God revealed the pretender I had allowed to sit on the throne. “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.” And I realized that God doesn’t want more effort, more productivity, or more results from me. What he desires is for me to have more of Himself in me. He wants me to embrace HIS heart, HIS knowledge, and HIS understanding. Like Paul, his grace must be enough for me. I can’t do it alone; I was never made to rule over myself. I was created to trust in Jesus to rule wisely over me, and it is time to invite the rightful king back onto his throne.

Who or what is sitting on the king’s throne in your life? Is there something that’s holding you back from becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus? If so, you can turn it over to Jesus right now and receive forgiveness and peace and restoration. I’ve allowed false kings to reign in my life for too long now, and I won’t settle for their tyranny anymore. I
want to be all in for Jesus, and I can only do that if I allow him to fully take charge of my life. What about you? Are you ready to invite Jesus to take his rightful place as the one true king in your life? Are you ready to cast out the pretenders and puppet kings you have allowed to take control? If so, the process begins when you recognize who Jesus truly is, when you confess that he alone is your savior and Lord, and when you trust that he is a good king and do what he commands.

I would like to close this morning with the words of a great hymn, O Worship the King all glorious above. Let this be our hearts’ cry this morning, as we welcome the king onto the throne in our lives once and for all.

O Worship the King all glorious above

O worship the King all-glorious above,
O gratefully sing his power and his love:
our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days,
pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
in you do we trust, nor find you to fail.
Your mercies, how tender, how firm to the end,
our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!

O measureless Might, unchangeable Love,
whom angels delight to worship above!
Your ransomed creation, with glory ablaze,
in true adoration shall sing to your praise!

VI. Closing Prayer

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give you all glory and honor and praise today, and we recognize you for who you are — the King of Kings, Prince of Peace, and Lord of Lords. As we enter
into this Holy Week, would you reveal to us the depths of your love, manifest in your Son Jesus, who for our sake endured the shame of a cross. Would you help us, even now, to open up the gates of our hearts and minds to receive you as our one and only King, and would you teach us to be faithful servants in your kingdom come. We ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.