

## ***Recognizing the King***

In the name of our King who comes to us today, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: a recurrent theme in a lot of our popular literature is that of “the king in disguise”. In the *Robin Hood* legends it’s Richard the Lion Hearted who comes back from the Crusades in disguise to reclaim his kingdom that has been usurped by his evil brother, John. The true king conceals his identity because he wants to find out who remains truly loyal to him. In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, the king sets aside his royal armor to mingle with his soldiers as one of them. He wants to find out what they really think of him and their cause, and how they feel about the battle they will fight in the morning against a much larger and more heavily armed French force. And then there’s the *Prince and the Pauper* story and its many variations, that tell of a prince or king who decides to see what life as one of his subjects is really like and so he goes out among them wearing a disguise leaving in his place a look alike to run the kingdom while he’s out. There are many other examples, but I think you’ll agree that it’s a popular idea to build a story around.

And what attracts us about these stories of disguised kings is that as readers, we like knowing the truth about king’s secret identity that the rest of the characters in the story don’t know. It’s fun to see how they interact with him before they know who he really is. And of course, a main feature of these stories is the eventual revelation of the king’s true identity and his return to his proper place. We like seeing how characters react to that too.

Well, since this is Palm Sunday, you’ve probably already guessed where I’m heading with this. In today’s Gospel reading we have Jesus as the disguised king. He is according to his divinity the Son of God and King of all Creation—but that’s now concealed by his humanity. And at the same time, he is according to his human ancestry the royal son of King David—but that too is disguised by his humble appearance and simple dress. But he is nevertheless a king twice over. And here we have him coming into what is both the spiritual capital of the world, since it is the holy city of God, and to what is also the political capital of the Jewish nation. So this is twice his capital city—the one place on earth that he really ought to be recognized. And now we have him parading into the city like a conquering hero while people sing their praises and call him “king”. But the funny thing is that almost no one truly recognizes him for who he is. And when we discover who it is that *does* recognize him, we find out it’s not at all whom we would have guessed.

Take, for example, those who should have known him best; and by that, I mean the Scribes and Pharisees. Why them? Because they knew better than anyone what to look for in the coming King. They were the very best Bible scholars of the day. They knew the promises of God forward and backward. They knew the Messianic prophecies that described the coming King like they knew the backs of their hands. And when we understand that it is in the Scriptures that Christ reveals himself—not just information about himself—but reveals *himself* in such a way that when we read and hear Scripture we are really seeing and hearing Christ, then we also understand that these learned men have been looking at Christ all their lives. And yet when they see him in the flesh, they do not know who he is. In fact, they hate him so much that they’re actively seeking to destroy him. It’s amazing that they do not recognize him and that they don’t see how he fulfills every Messianic promise and foreshadowing in Scripture.

And then we’ve got Jesus’ closest disciples, the ones who have been with him for three years now. Do they recognize him? Well, they’ve got some of it right. Over a year earlier they’d confessed that they believed him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. Now, they don’t know the Scriptures quite as well as the Pharisees, but they do know Jesus personally. They have seen his power. They’ve seen him still storms, heal people from all kinds of diseases, and even raise the dead; they themselves did the distribution when he fed thousands with a few loaves of bread. More importantly, they have heard him teach and explain the things of God with profound wisdom and authority. Though they are impressed by the miracles, what impresses them even more are the things he taught them. They said they would stick with him through thick and thin because he has the words of eternal life. Funny though, when things do get a little rough later in the week, it is Peter who will speak on behalf of the group: “*I don’t know the man. I don’t know who he is.*” Peter will mean it as a

lie—but in a deeper sense he'll be correct: he really doesn't know who Jesus is. To none of these disciples is Jesus really the King.

And then we've got this crowd of local followers. They are some of the citizens of Jerusalem who have heard of Jesus' miracles. Perhaps some have even seen one themselves. That's their primary interest in Jesus: they hope to see some more miracles. They hope Jesus will do some for them. They wave palm branches and line his path with their garments to show their loyalty and they sing his praises to impress him with their devotion. They even go so far as to call him King, and while doing so they use titles and praises normally reserved for God alone. So, they seem to know who exactly he is. But they are a fickle bunch. This will be a bad week for miracle watchers. Jesus will spend most of his time teaching in the temple. There will be no spectacular displays of power as they hope. They will become disenchanted with all the talk and so little action; and before this week is through, their lips that now honor him will be calling for his death. They really don't recognize the King either.

Well, then, is there *anyone* who recognizes the King? We're relieved to find that the answer is "yes, there's one". Who is it? It's the donkey on which Jesus is riding. A stupid donkey recognizes in Jesus what no one else does. How do I know? We're told that it's a donkey that no one has ever ridden before. If you had tried riding such a donkey through the crowded streets of Jerusalem in the middle of a shouting crowd, my guess is that the ride wouldn't last very long. You'd be bucked off in a matter of seconds. And then you'd be picking yourself up off the ground and nursing your bruises. That's because the donkey wouldn't know you nor care to be ridden. But he knows Jesus and he willingly submits himself to the authority of his Creator and King. And in this we see an amazing fulfillment of the words of God through the prophet Isaiah: "*The ox knows his master, the donkey knows who provides his food—but my people do not recognize me.*"

Oh, and this donkey is not alone in recognizing the King. When the Pharisees hear the crowd using phrases borrowed from the Scriptures to honor Jesus, they're scandalized, and they urge Jesus to restrain them. They think it's sacrilegious for the crowd to speak of him so. But Jesus responds by saying if the crowd were silent, the stones of the city would cry out. It seems that the creation itself has been waiting for the King's coming. The apostle Paul says as much in his letter to the Romans. He writes, "*The entire creation groans and labors as if in child birth, waiting in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.*" The earth itself yearns for the day when the curse of sin will be lifted, and it knows to whom to look for deliverance.

But there's also a subtle prediction in Jesus' words about the stones crying out in recognition of the King. You see, the Jews of Jesus' day used to call the Gentiles "stones". They felt that anyone who wasn't a Jew had the same standing before God as a rock. As far as the Jews were concerned, Gentiles had no sense, no soul, no spiritual sight. They thought God didn't care about them. Strangely enough, when the Jews of Jesus' day rejected him, it was precisely to these "stones" that the Good News about Jesus went. The Gospel spread like wild fire throughout the pagan Roman world, and before long, thousands of those Gentile "stones" were recognizing Jesus as their King and singing his praises. And again, just five days after Jesus came into Jerusalem, it was a Gentile "stone" named Pontius Pilate who insisted that the sign on his cross read: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

It's strange isn't it? It seems the more light on the subject people had, the less they recognized the King. Meanwhile people and things whom you wouldn't think should have known anything at all had it right. Why is that? Well, let me suggest that the reason for all the confusion is that people tend to look for a King who will meet their perceived needs. When they look for a leader, they look for one who will give them what they think they want. And that makes sense: that's what our democratic campaigns and elections are all about. We always vote for the candidate who says he will give us what we want—we see him as our leader. We are not going to recognize as our leader someone who is offering something we don't think we need.

So again, we could take the Pharisees: these are people who devoted their lives to pleasing God. They've worked awfully hard at it. And so they are looking for a king who will tell them how much he appreciates their hard work, and who will reward them for their loyal service. But this Jesus is not at all impressed with them. He says you have to be much better than any of them to get into the Kingdom of God. He keeps telling them to repent, as if they were just common sinners—and then on top of

it, he has the audacity to hang out with tax collectors and prostitutes, people who have never shown a lick of moral restraint. They come to him with big teary eyes, weeping about how wicked they've been, and telling him how sorry they are. And these he welcomes and says nice things about. What kind of king is that? One the Pharisees don't need, to be sure.

Or the disciples of Jesus, what do they want in a king? They want one who will give them places of honor in the coming kingdom. They are constantly fighting about which of them shall be named the greatest. But Jesus, as smart and powerful as he is, keeps talking about serving others and suffering. He talks about striving to take the lowest places and doing the dirtiest work. What kind of king is that?

And the crowd of miracle seekers ... there's no need to guess about what kind of king they want. They want one who will put bread on their table, heal them when they get sick, and use his miraculous power to take care of every other physical need they might have. But this Jesus, as it turns out, "is just talk, talk, talk about pursuing righteousness, and seeking God's face, and striving to obtain an everlasting treasure. Hey, life happens right here. You want to be my king? Then you better take care of me right now."

And I guess the big question for all of us on this Palm Sunday is what kind of King are you looking for? We have more light on the subject than any of the people we've heard about so far, and today Jesus comes to us again—right here into our midst. Will we recognize him? Or will we miss him because he doesn't seem to be the King we came looking for? ... because he doesn't seem to be responding to our perceived needs? Today Christ comes to you in the Scripture. He comes revealing your sin so that he can call you to repentance. Is that the kind of King you want? Or did you want one who would tell you what a fine job you've been doing as a Christian and who will reward you for your hard work. To the extent that you want the latter, you will not recognize your King here today.

Today Christ also comes among us in the needs of everyone here. He is present in every opportunity to bend down and show true love and humble service to someone who needs it. Do you recognize your King there? Or are you looking for honor, position, and glory for yourself? Are you looking for a way to get some respect? To the extent that you're looking for the latter, you will not recognize your King here today.

And today Jesus comes into our midst to work mighty acts of power and salvation. He comes to bring us the gifts of God's forgiveness and everlasting life. He does it by offering up to you his body and blood under the forms of humble bread and wine to assure you of your salvation. Is that what you want from Jesus? Or do you often find yourself hoping instead primarily for his help to improve your situation in this life? "Jesus, give me a better job with lots of money, make my pain go away, help so and so get better"—whatever—"because I need *that* a whole lot more than I need Holy Communion with you!"

Don't you think it's amazing that we who have the most light on Jesus, often fail to recognize our King? We sing his praises, we promise him our loyalty, but we don't know him when we see him. Would that we had the sense of a stupid donkey or a pile of rocks! At least then we would know what we truly need.

Fortunately for us there is Another who knows what we truly need—and he has more light on the subject than anyone. I'm speaking of God our heavenly Father. He knew that we needed to be saved from our sin, and from our spiritual blindness, and from our greedy quest for power and position, and from our pathetic lack of ability to see beyond the present reality to the one that really matters because it will last forever. And though he had the most light on Jesus, our King, because he also knew our deep need, he too did not recognize Jesus. On Good Friday he didn't see him as his righteous and holy Son. He chose instead to see him as a sinner. He chose to see him as the only sinner who ever lived. He chose to see all of your sins and mine as acts committed by Jesus. And so he poured all of his wrath and anger against our sin on him. Our King was lifted up on a cross and crowned with the thorny curse of damnation to give us what we really need. Do you recognize him there?

There was one man who did. He saw Jesus as his King when he realized what he really needed. Nailed to a cross beside Jesus, he saw at last that he was nothing more than a dying sinner, and that what he really needed was a Savior. It was then that he was given the grace to see what no one else could at that hour: that the naked, bloody, tortured figure suffering beside him was indeed the True and only King. And

so he said to him, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He was granted his request. May God give all of us the grace to see ourselves in the same way, so that we will know our deepest need, and so recognize our King when he comes among us now, and also enter with him into his kingdom in Paradise. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***