CONFRONTING THE KING

Matthew 21:28-46

In Matthew, Jesus is presented as the King, as the long awaited Messiah-King, the Son of David, the King of Israel, the One foretold by the O.T. prophets. In fact, 22 times in his gospel Matthew mentions how Jesus fulfilled O.T. prophecies concerning the Messiah. And since every king has a kingdom, the Kingdom of heaven, the kingdom ruled by the Messiah, is mentioned frequently. What has been clear as we’ve studied both Matthew and John the past year is that God’s chosen nation of Israel, the Jewish people, influenced by their religious leaders, by and large rejected their king. They rejected Jesus as the Messiah. And so now we come to the last week of Jesus’ life. Chapter 21 records events at the beginning of that week. By the end of the week Jesus will go to the cross and die. As the Chapter opens it is Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly. As He approaches one of Jerusalem’s city gates He’s riding on a donkey (Zech 9:9 prophesied this). Crowds of people spread their cloaks on the ground in front of Jesus. They cut branches off trees and lay them out on the road. They shout, “Hosanna!” (“save now!”) “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” It’s quite a scene as Jesus makes His way into Jerusalem. Some of the Pharisees in the crowd apparently took exception to what the people were shouting and said to Jesus: “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” Jesus responded by saying, “I tell you, if they remain silent, the stones will cry out.” The words they shouted, that Jesus is the Messiah is a message that must and will be proclaimed. So on the first day of Passion Week Jesus enters Jerusalem as the King.

His first order of business is to go into the temple. He sees money-changers and merchants in the temple courtyards and drives them all out. He says, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers!’” This is the second time Jesus did this. Recall that He did this same thing early in His ministry, in John Chapter 2. The Pharisees, of course, don’t like what Jesus just did, however, there’s really not much they can do about it because the people have such a high regard for Jesus. This all takes place on Sunday.

The next day, Monday, Jesus heads back into Jerusalem. The scripture tells us that He spent the night in Bethany, presumably at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, with His disciples. So the next morning He goes back into Jerusalem and right back into the temple. On this day we see Jesus acting in the role of a Prophet. Over the next few days Jesus is in the temple doing what prophets of God do – He teaches truth, He reveals God’s nature, He speaks God’s message. His audience is primarily the Jewish religious leaders – the chief priests and the elders of the people. These are the folks at the heart of the opposition against Jesus. It should come as no surprise, then, that there would be a confrontation with Jesus. They challenge Jesus – right in the middle of His teaching – saying, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Well, Jesus doesn’t answer their questions directly. Instead He gives several parables which deal with their rejection of Him as the Messiah. We will look at two of these parables this morning and then the last one next week. On Thursday evening Jesus will be betrayed and arrested. On Friday He will be crucified and will die for the sins of the world. Then on Sunday morning He will be resurrected from the dead.

So at the beginning of this Passion week we see Jesus as King with His triumphal entry. In the middle of the week we see Him as Prophet proclaiming God’s truth. At the end of the week we’ll see Him as Priest – not merely offering a blood sacrifice on an altar for the forgiveness of sins – but shedding His own blood. The writer of Hebrews says, “He (Jesus) entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.” (Heb 9:12)

So let’s take a look at the first of Jesus’ three parables that He gave in the temple in response to the religious leaders.

READ Matthew 21:28-32

 In this parable the first son initially tells his father that he will not obey, but then he changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard as he had been told. Who do you think that the first son represents? He represents sinners who initially reject God but then repent and turn to Him. These repentant sinners are “the tax collectors and prostitutes” to whom Jesus refers. This obvious group of terrible sinners at some point feels remorse for the life they have lived and they turn away from their sins and they follow Christ.

The second son is the opposite of the first son. He initially says that he will obey his father and go to work in the vineyard. But then he decides not to go and he turns away. Who does he represent? He represents the nation of Israel in Jesus’ day, who are misled spiritually by the scribes and Pharisees. Like their ancestors in the Book of Judges, they verbally say all the right things, but then disobey God. In the temple they praise God with their lips. They say they desire to do God’s will, but then they do not obey.

They perform all the required religious acts of the Law, but these practices prove to be hollow. The hearts of the people are far from God. So degenerate have they become that they cannot even recognize the very Son of God standing right there in front of them! Their long-awaited Messiah is here at last – the One John the Baptist had prepared the hearts of the people to receive and then had identified when He showed up. But instead of honoring Jesus as King, they question His authority. And in just a few days they will instigate the crowds in crying out for Him to be crucified!

So, who will make it to heaven? Answer: sinners who repent of their sins and follow Jesus Christ by faith. Who will not make it to heaven? Answer: those who do not repent of their sins and follow Christ. This includes even so-called “religious” people, those who feel that they have no need to repent or those who follow some other pathway to God other than Jesus Christ.

So Jesus delivers this message loud and clear to the Jewish religious leaders. But He’s not finished. Before they can say anything He gives them yet a second parable…

READ Matthew 21:33-36

The landowner represents God and the vineyard represents Israel. The vine-growers, who are merely renting the vineyard from the landowner, represent the Jewish religious leaders. What do the vine-growers do? They beat up and even kill the landowner’s slaves. These slaves represent the prophets and priests who have faithfully brought God’s message to the nation. But Israel did not want to hear from God so they mistreated and in some cases killed His prophets, the messengers of light.

READ Matthew 21:37-39

The landowner decides to send his own son down to his vineyard. Since the landowner represents God, then the son represents Jesus. The landowner reasons that the vine-growers will respect the son more than they did the slaves. But they kill the son also. In this parable Jesus basically exposes the murderous plot of the Jewish religious leaders to kill Him. Do you think the events that will soon take place, which end with His arrest and crucifixion, catch Jesus off guard – that He doesn’t see any of this coming? Not at all! He knows what is going to happen. And it’s all part of God’s redemptive plan.

READ Matthew 21:40-44

The result of the vine-growers rejection of the son is that the landowner gets new tenants. These new tenants represent us, the Gentiles, who today make up the majority of the church of Jesus Christ. “The stone which the builders rejected,” of course, speaks about Jesus. But this building stone will in the end be a crushing stone. He will destroy God’s enemies.

Well, does this parable hit home with the religious leaders? Do you think they get the point that Jesus is trying to make? Do they understand what Jesus is claiming? Absolutely! Just look at the next two verses…

READ Matthew 21:45-46

Blinded by their own hatred and self-seeking motives, they do not even see Jesus as the people see Him – a prophet sent by God. I look at this series of parables as yet another opportunity presented by God to the religious leaders to see Jesus for Who He is, God’s grace to those who have initially rejected Christ. Sadly, their rejection continues.

Application: How do YOU see Jesus? Do you see Him as a good man? Or is He a prophet? Or maybe a fraud? Or do you see Jesus as the Bible presents Him? The Bible tells us that Jesus is “holy” (Hebrews 7:26), “pure” (1 John 3:3), “righteous” (1 John 2:1), “the Messiah” (John 1:41), and “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). Because of what He did on the cross and because of who He is He is worthy of our praise this morning. We praise Him for being our King, our Prophet, our great High Priest, our Savior and our Lord. So let’s do just that. Let’s praise Him!

Sing “Praise Him, Praise Him!” a hymn by Fanny Crosby, 1869