

The Family Business: Royalty

James 1:2-12; Luke 19:28-40

One feature of gospel stories and gospel teaching that modern Americans are prone to entirely miss is the notion of kingdom. After all, it has been 243 years since any American was ruled by a royal family. And so this notion of patriotism involving loyalty to a royal family tends to escape us. Our national anthem is not “God Save the King”. Americans are individualists, idealists who want to organize around the principles which each one of us hold dear. We think in terms of an American Dream and we struggle to piece together all the different notions that each of us thinks that dream ought to be. The result is that we tend to work in terms of individual rights and individual conscience more than in terms of family loyalty and relationships.

But the world in which Jesus lived and from which the gospel arose was ruled from horizon to horizon by royal families with only a rare exception here and there. Which matters because the founding principle of the gospel, the key concept by which our souls can be saved is that the universe is ruled by a suzerain, a fancy word meaning emperor, and that you and I, men and women were placed on this planet to serve as vassals, another fancy word meaning an under-king. So we are the under-kings, the local vassals appointed by God to rule the physical universe.

That was our original job description. Did you ever wonder why at the height of our prosperity Americans felt compelled to spend a fortune to send a dozen or so Americans to wander around on the moon? It doesn't make sense till we remember that God created us in his image, to explore and tame and organize and rule. We've been doing that our whole history. It's why children like terrariums, the world in a jar, an ecosystem for us to design and rule just like God did ours.

And the original design was for men and women to both learn and to express the glory of God's character and wisdom as we work together to turn the world around us into a garden that will serve as a sanctuary for us and as a throne room for God. What it means in practical terms for us today is that the whole universe runs on two interwoven principles, first, God's authority, and then, the relationships that grow from that. Of course the Fall, Adam and Eve turning their backs on God and striking out on their own, profoundly undermined, all but destroyed, both principles.

And human history in general and our own personal experiences in particular tell the story of how tragic and painful life can be when God's authority is thrown aside and his love isn't wanted or observed. When we throw aside God and throw aside love, it becomes all we can do to survive other people's treachery and our own folly. And it was this cycle of lawlessness and lovelessness that God has called us to return from, beginning on the day that he banished us from the Garden.

The whole Bible tells the story of fallen men and women like you and me, who repent, turn back to God and begin to rediscover the art of serving him as a vassal and exploring and taming and organizing and ruling in his name. And of course the Bible story culminates with Jesus, the eternally begotten Son of God, sent to become one of us, God's human vassal, sent to seek and tame and organize and rule us, men and women from everywhere, willing to take Jesus as king, willing to join the royal family and resume the royal mission first given to Adam and Eve.

So it's no accident that the first public word Jesus spoke wasn't about anyone of us in particular saving his soul, but all of us together joining hearts and hands in something bigger than ourselves. Jesus said, in Mark's gospel: "*The time is fulfilled! The kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe the good news!*" The point being that personal salvation, personal forgiveness and healing and wholeness and direction are things we discover, things God gives us only as we find our place and take up our duties in the royal family Jesus calls us to join as we give our lives to him. It's no accident that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to stop addressing his Father as your Royal Majesty, your Exquisite Highness and instead to simply address God as "*Our Father in heaven...*".

God the Father is the Suzerain, the first and absolute Sovereign of the entire universe. No one can belong to him without bowing to his absolute authority over everything that is. And as God's ruling human vassal, Jesus bowed to his Father's authority. Before holy week is done, we'll hear Jesus say to his Father about the cross, "*Not my will, but your will be done.*" Jesus bowed to his Father's authority and you and I will repent of our own wants and plans as we learn to serve the Father as Jesus did. But the key to repentance, the key to obedience is to believe the good news.

God the Father only ever said about Jesus, "*This is my Son whom I love.*" From all eternity past, God the Son had existed in a relationship with his Father that was steeped in love and trust. Christ obeyed the Father because he trusted the Father, was confident of the Father's love even in and through the dark extremity of the cross. What makes the authority of the Father bearable, what brings us through the difficulty of our circumstances and the impossibility of what God commands is the good news that God both loves us and is powerful enough to see us through and past anything he requires us to bear. This Jesus proved in the seven day period we'll observe starting today (Palm Sunday).

A parade featuring a man swaying back and forth on a donkey colt would have been a riddle to any Roman who saw it. Their parades were led by conquerors in chariots and on war horses, dressed in shining armor and surround by fighting men. Roman parades featured conquered prisoners on their way to execution Force and terror and coercion was the undertone of the whole exercise in a Roman triumph. But in Israel a different tradition had arisen.

The first man riding into Jerusalem on a donkey colt was Solomon a thousand years before Jesus followed in his footsteps. His brother Adonijah had manipulated Israel's high and mighty leaders

into boosting him to be king. Everybody had gone to Adonijah's coronation banquet, except David who may have been too frail to go even if he had wanted. But David had a different idea about who would follow him to the throne, a strange idea. Bathsheba's son, Solomon, of all people, David chose to follow him as king. The name Solomon means "Peaceful".

All there was to escort Solomon into the city was a priest, a prophet, some musicians and a platoon or so of the palace guard. The commanders attending Adonijah's banquet could have overrun Solomon's escort in a heartbeat, but in those days David was God's vassal king and the people rallied around Solomon as pitiful as he must have looked led by priest and prophet and surrounded by not enough troops and too many minstrels. The people of the city celebrated Solomon as king and the high and mighty at Adonijah's banquet quickly found excuses to leave the banquet and make their way to Solomon's side.

And I think it became a tradition in Jerusalem that Israel's kings would take the throne, not as mighty conquerors, but as men of peace, saviors and builders and servants of that great Suzerain who resided far away and far above any palace that men could build, any army that men could lead. So what for the Romans was a riddle was absolutely clear to the Israelites who saw Jesus swaying his way into the city on a donkey colt that day. Unarmed and unprotected, Jesus was making the claim that he was God's new human vassal, a prince of peace who by trusting and obeying his Father would bring people from everywhere into God's kingdom, and into the royal family.

A vassal king by definition is the servant of Someone greater than himself, something bigger than his own cause. Jesus had said so many a time. In Mark's gospel he said, "*...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for the many...You know that those who are considered rulers of the nations lord it over them...but not so among you...whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*"

Which leads us to James in our Call to Worship. Why do you think James ended up the ruling elder of that first Christian congregation in Jerusalem city? Well, the apostles who founded the church had been run out of the city or killed. So the people who knew Jesus best were gone, and I think the early Christian disciples, being ancient people, seeing themselves as servants in a royal family, turned to the eldest half-brother of King Jesus to be their ruler and leader.

And I think the first chapter of James could be taken as a working memorandum of how government in Jesus' kingdom should look. Members of the royal family, servants of the vassal king should greet temptation as something joyful, an opportunity to become like Jesus who also was tempted. We should pray for wisdom as Jesus prayed at Gethsemane and other key junctions in his life.

“Let the lowly man boast in his exaltation...”, James wrote. What exaltation? Good News! A lowly man or woman in God’s kingdom has the Suzerain for a Father, has been promised a hundredfold over whatever it cost him to throw in with King Jesus. *“...and [let the rich man boast] in his humiliation.”* Rich or poor the same facts apply. Our throwing in with Jesus, and our faithfulness in the ups and downs that follow will be rewarded as Jesus was rewarded for keeping faith with his Father and with us.

Finally, James wrote: *“Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for after he has stood the test, he will received the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.”*

Of course, the original blessed man is Jesus. The crown of life he earned for standing against Satan and obeying his Father all the way through the cross will be given to us because Jesus earned it for us. Our place in the royal family, the love and forgiveness we enjoy from the Father, the healing and power and meaning we find in serving him all come to us as gifts that Jesus earned for us.

On Palm Sunday, the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke the riff raff for singing that he was king. But it was no good, Jesus answered. *“If these are silenced, even the stones will cry out!”* The point being that the Suzerain will have his way, He will see Jesus, his human vassal honored. And we will find ourselves, our lives will mean something, only if we bow to his authority as king and find the love he has for us and wants us to share with each other.