

The Hidden King – A Palm Sunday Sermon

Luke 19:29-40; 22:39-23:56



The story of the Hidden King is one that we are familiar with from many fairy tales and other stories—stories like *The Prince and the Pauper*, King Arthur, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the Frog Prince. It is the story of a king whose identity is unknown by those around him. The whole point of the story is that although the king is the king no one except the king knows who he really is. Of course, the king does not have to be a king—as we know from Cinderella—but it is usually a king.

A central irony of the story is that the king does not look like or act like a king is supposed to act. A king is not supposed to be a frog. The girl who cleans the ashes out of the fire place is not supposed to marry the prince. At some point in the story there is usually a trial—a time when those who do not believe that the king who does not look like a king is a king is challenged to prove that he is the king. At the time of the trial, the king stands alone because only he knows whether he is the true king, and it is only the outcome of the trial that can reveal the true king. And there are often pretenders to the throne. How do we decide which one is the real king?

The king does not demonstrate his identity at first, but there

are often clues that he is the real king to those who are paying attention. Later on, the king demonstrates who he really is, often by performing some great deed, or producing some sign that proves his true identity. The young King Arthur draws a sword from a stone; Cinderella puts on the glass slipper that fits only her foot. In *The Prince and the Pauper*, young King Edward produces the Royal Seal. The story wraps up at the end when the king's identity is finally revealed.

And after the king's true identity is known, things are sorted out. Those who treated the king like the king he really was when his identity was secret, are rewarded. And those who doubted, well, they get their just deserts. A key theme of the story is that the verdict of the original trial is now reversed. Those who doubted or believed the king were really the ones who were on trial all along—not the king. The ugly stepsisters thought that Cinderella was just the kitchen drudge, and one of them would marry the prince. Were they ever wrong!

The readings for Palm Sunday have all the elements of this story of the Hidden King. And, it is hard to know which came first. Are all these fairy stories echoes in some way of the gospel story? Or does the gospel story work itself out the way it does because the fairy stories say something about the nature of the universe? When the true King comes among us, are we bound to miss him because we do not have our eyes open, and we ignore the clues?

From the very beginning of the gospel story, it is clear that it is the story of the Hidden King. In Luke's gospel, the story begins with angels appearing to Zechariah and Mary and shepherds tending their flocks, to tell them that the king is on his way. Gabriel says to Mary, "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33).

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he proclaims that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15), and his teaching and miracles are signs of its presence. His parables are stories about its hidden nature. It is small like a mustard seed, it is like leaven hidden in flour, it is like a treasure hidden in a field (Luke 13:18-21; Matt. 13:44).

When Jesus finally asks his disciples who they think he is, it is Peter who answers rightly: "You are the Christ, the Son of God." (Lk. 9:20) "The Christ" is the Greek translation for the Hebrew title "Messiah," the one who is anointed to be King of the Jews.

With Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it is clear that the unveiling of the true King's identity now approaches. The time of trial is near when the Hidden King will be asked to prove his identity. But, as we know, it is not the king who is really on trial.

Who is put on trial? There are basically two groups. There are those who recognize that Jesus really is the Hidden King, and those who think he is an imposter.

Among the first group is the crowd, the anonymous multitudes who follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus enters into Jerusalem not on the war horse of a conqueror, but on the colt of a donkey. But those who know the clues will remember the promise of the prophet Zechariah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech. 9:9) The crowds read the clues, and they know what this means. As Jesus rides along, the crowd shouts "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 19:38)

But the crowds will shortly be proven wrong. The king they cheer will soon be crucified. Then what will happen to them? Was one of them perhaps Simon of Cyrene, who ends up carrying

Jesus' cross? (Luke 23:26) Do the crowds become the bystanders, the "Daughters of Jerusalem," who weep for Jesus as they follow him to the place called the Skull? (v. 27) Are they perhaps the ones who, after Jesus was clearly dead, "returned home, beating their breasts?" (v. 48)

Then there are Jesus' close disciples. At Jesus' last supper with them, they quarrel about who will have the greatest place in the kingdom. And Jesus has to tell them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them . . . but not so with you. . . . I am among you as the one who serves." (Luke 22:27) But by the time the night is over, they have already forgotten this lesson. Like the crowds, they too seem dumbfounded when the King they believe in seems not to be the king, after all. Peter, who had said to Jesus, "You are the Christ," denies Jesus three times.

The second group is the cynics – those who had known that Jesus was an imposter all along. We know the type because we meet them everyday. What marks these people is that they do not believe enough in anything to be loyal to anyone but themselves. The religious leaders do not really believe that Caesar is king, but they do not believe that Jesus is king, either, and they'll gladly pretend to be loyal to Caesar if that will get rid of Jesus. So they tell Pilate that Jesus forbids paying tribute to Caesar, and he claims to be Christ, a king (Luke 23:2).

Pilate knows that Caesar is king, but he also knows the religious leaders are being cynical, and he wants nothing to do with responsibility for this mess. He asks Jesus "Are you the king of the Jews?" to which Jesus replies, "You have said so." (Luke 23:3) But that is certainly the one thing Pilate did not want to say. So he sends Jesus to Herod, and he eventually offers to trade him for a real political revolutionary, an insurrectionist named Barabbas.

Herod does not believe Jesus is a king, either. But Herod does

claim to be the real Jewish king, so he makes fun of Jesus, and his soldiers dress Jesus in royal clothing – real school yard behavior: “If you’re a king, let’s dress you like a king.” So in the end, Pilate, and Herod, and the Jewish religious leaders all work together to put Jesus on a cross. And Pilate cynically pronounces their verdict with his inscription on Jesus’ cross, “This is the King of the Jews.” (Luke 23:38)

Finally, there are the bystanders. The soldiers have nothing at stake here. Jesus is just one more Jewish troublemaker among thousands that the Romans have put on crosses. But they know a loser when they see one. No one who dies on a Roman cross is a king. And apparently some of the Jewish rulers who helped put Jesus on the cross show up, just to gloat. In the last hours of Jesus’ life, at the moment of supreme humility when Jesus literally cannot even lift a finger to quench his own thirst, the Roman soldiers and the Jewish leaders join together in one of history’s most unlikely and perverse alliances – to mock a man they had worked together to nail to a cross. “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” (Luke 23:35-36) Even one of the thieves who was crucified with him, decides to use his last dying breaths to join in with the voices of those who had nailed him to a cross as well: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (v. 39)

This, then, is the real moment of trial. Not so much even the trial before the Jewish leaders, or Pilate, or Herod, but this – stripped naked, beaten, nailed to a cross, and ridiculed by Jesus’ enemies in his dying moments. If there were a time for the Hidden King finally to reveal himself, this would be it. This is the time to pull the sword from the stone. This is the time to reveal the location of the Royal Seal. But instead Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 24:46) And he dies. And the crowds go home, beating their breasts. And it turns out that the Hidden King was an imposter after all. This is not how the story is supposed to

end.

But who really is on trial? That depends on whether or not Jesus really is the Hidden King. If Jesus was not the king, then the cynical mockings of the religious leaders, of Pilate, of Herod, of the Roman soldiers, and, even the crucified thief, are correct. Of course, if they are correct, then cynicism is the right way to get through life. And, is that not, after all the ways things work out in this world? Look out for yourself. Do not get taken in. Do not place your hopes in Hidden Kings with no power. They get nailed to crosses.

But the real outcome of the trial depends on who Jesus really is. The whole point of the story is that Jesus is not only a Hidden King, but he is the One Real King. As Israel had no King but God when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, and gave them his law at Mt. Sinai, so if Jesus is Israel's One True King, then he is God come among us, the Creator of the universe. But if Jesus is that King, then it is the cynics who are on trial.

But so are Jesus' followers, the apostles, and those who deserted him when the cynics put him on trial. Because in the Hidden King story, the king's supporters are supposed to stand by him. They are not supposed to flee. Ultimately, the entire human race is on trial, because when the Hidden King who is the Creator of the Universe was put on trial, he stood alone. When God came among us, we did not recognize him. We put the Hidden King on trial as an imposter, and we put him to death. Or, at the least, we fled. We left him to die, alone. Nailed to a cross.

But no, not quite alone. There are two people in the story who, in the moment of trial, still see the Hidden King. And they are the unlikeliest people in the entire story. One is the other thief who was crucified with Jesus, and who said to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The other was the Roman centurion, the pagan soldier who was

probably in charge of the soldiers who crucified Jesus. Luke says that "when he saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'" (Luke 23:47)

Well, then, what is the verdict? The verdict was not pronounced on Good Friday, but on Easter Sunday. When God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, his Father pronounced his own verdict on the judges, and on the trial itself. If Jesus has risen from the dead, then Jesus is God's Son, God come among us, and he is after all, the King of the Jews, and the Creator of the entire universe. But what, then, of those who put Jesus on trial? What of those who deserted him? In the Hidden King story, those who stood by the King are supposed to be rewarded, and those who doubted get their just deserts. But, as we know from history, Pilate, and Herod, and the Jewish leaders, kept their jobs. As for the disciples, in the end, no one stood by Jesus. Except for the good thief, and the centurion, everyone doubted. Once again, the Hidden King story has not turned out like it is supposed to.

But here is where we need to listen to the story a little more closely. For when Jesus was crucified, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 22:34) And when Jesus appears to his disciples on Easter Sunday, to those who had deserted them, his first words are "Peace to you!" and "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself." (Luke 24:36,38) And his promise to the believing thief was "today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

This is a Hidden King story, but it is the real Hidden King story, and it has a slightly different ending. When the real Hidden King is put on trial as an imposter, he allows himself to be found guilty. His way of judging those who judged him as an imposter, and who deserted him, is to take on himself their judgment. It is not the case that those who found the Hidden King guilty get their just deserts, and those who stood by him get rewarded. The judgment of Easter is that the Hidden King

has returned, and his word to those who condemned him is "Father, forgive them!" And to those who deserted him, his word is "Peace be with you!" And to those who pray to him, "Remember me," his word is "You will be with me in paradise!"

As we finish this Lenten season, and as we approach Good Friday and Easter, each one of us is no doubt aware that sometimes we have been cynics who have betrayed the Hidden King, and sometimes we have been fearful followers who have doubted and deserted him, and, rarely, but perhaps sometimes, we have even been those who have had the courage to pray, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And the Hidden King's message to us is "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself." Do we have the courage to hope and believe that the Hidden King is the real King? That the king who was crucified is the King who is blessed because he comes to us in the name of the Lord?