

Jesus has come to Jerusalem.

He entered the city like the new Solomon, the Son of David –
and he has cleansed the temple in a symbolic purge of its corruption.
In the cursing of the fig tree he has proclaimed a curse upon Israel,
and at the end of chapter 11 he has hinted at the divine authority
that lays behind his mission.

We have come to the very heart of the ministry of Jesus.

He is in the final week of his public ministry –
the passion week where he is preparing to go to the cross.
Everything that Jesus says and does in this week is designed to show his disciples
who he is and what he is doing –
so that *they* will be able to carry on his ministry after his resurrection.

And of course Mark understands this,

and so Mark highlights this connection between the coming Kingdom of Jesus
and the resurrection.

Jesus has already said three times that he is going to die –
and that he will be raised from the dead.

It is true that the disciples don't understand what this means yet.
But they will.

To sum it up:

because Jesus has been raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father,
he *is* the King.
The Kingdom of God has come in the exaltation of the Son of God.

What does it mean that Jesus is King?

That is a good question to ask yourself every day.

What does it mean that Jesus is King?

When you wake up in the morning:

What does it mean that Jesus is King?

When you are talking with your children:

What does it mean that Jesus is King?

When temptation comes:

What does it mean that Jesus is King?

Tonight we are looking at three encounters between Jesus and the Jewish leaders.

The first focuses on an image from Israel's past: the vineyard.

The second focuses on an image from Israel's present: Caesar.

The third focuses on a question from Israel's future: the resurrection.

It is also important to understand who Jesus is talking to in each situation:
in the first he is talking with the chief priests, scribes and elders
(they are the ones in charge – the tenants of the vineyard!)
in the second he is talking with Pharisees and Herodians
(not usually considered allies!)
and in the third he is talking with the Sadducees
(a wealthy and powerful constituency in the Sanhedrin)
so that in these three episodes Jesus encounters all the power brokers in Judaism.

But Jesus seeks no alliance with any of them.
He is no politician campaigning for votes.
He is the King.

1. Israel's Past: The Vineyard of the LORD and the Death of the Son (12:1-12)

12:1 And he began to speak to them in parables.

*“A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it
and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower,
and leased it to tenants and went into another country.*

We sang Psalm 80 that speaks of Israel as a vine which the LORD brought out of Egypt
and planted in the land.

The image of the vine is a common one throughout the OT,
but there is one passage especially that Mark wants you to think of here:

Isaiah 5:1-7

Isaiah says:

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard:

*My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.*

Isaiah 5 starts off *exactly* like Mark 12.

So when Jesus starts speaking in a parable about a man and a vineyard,
with a winepress and a tower,
no doubt everyone is expecting the *vineyard* to be the problem.

After all, in Isaiah 5 the problem with the vineyard is that it yields “stink fruit.”

And so the LORD says:

I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

*I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briers and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.*

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts in the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!*

So everyone is expecting Jesus to follow Isaiah's lead and proclaim judgment on Israel.

But he doesn't.

After all, Jesus has not come to proclaim that "exile is coming" –
his message is that the "time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand;
repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15)

His message is that the exile is over.
There is still a problem with the vineyard –
but the problem is centered on the tenants who are running the vineyard.

*2 When the season came, he sent a servant [doulos] to the tenants
to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.
3 And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.
4 Again he sent to them another servant [doulos],
and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully.
5 And he sent another, and him they killed.
And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.*

By this point (especially since Jesus has connected the story with Isaiah 5)
there would be some recognition that Jesus is speaking
about how Israel's leaders have treated the prophets!

Who is Jesus talking to?
"he began to speak to *them*" –
go back to 11:27 –
"they" are the chief priests, the scribes and the elders.
They are the rulers – those in authority in the temple in Jerusalem.

God sent his servants the prophets to Israel,
but the leaders of Israel mistreated them and killed them.

*6 He had still one other, a beloved son.
Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'*

The language of the beloved son echoes the story of Abraham and his beloved son, Isaac.

Certainly *we* who have read the whole book of Mark,
know that the Father has spoken twice from heaven
(at Jesus' baptism and at the transfiguration)
identifying Jesus as the beloved son.

But even those who were listening in Jerusalem would have understood.
Given how Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey's colt,
imitating Solomon and being hailed as the Son of David –
and given how Psalm 80 spoke of the salvation of the vineyard
coming through “the man of your right hand, the son of man”
namely, the Davidic king –
everyone understood that Jesus is speaking of himself.

Jesus is the beloved son whom the Father is sending to Israel.

Surely, they will respect my son!

If you think in terms of the story, the father is an idiot!

The tenants have flouted his claims and rejected his authority.

If they killed the servants, what makes him think that they would respect the son?

But of course, that is not Jesus' point.

The Father sends Jesus – his beloved son –

knowing full well what will happen.

They *should* respect the son – but they will not.

7 But those tenants said to one another,

'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'

There is no legal basis for their claim.

If you kill the heir that does not give you title to his land!

But sin is not rational!

8 And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.

Mark uses the word “ekballo” here.

Jesus had “cast out” the money changers from the temple,
just as he had cast demons out of Israel.

Now Jesus says that the son will be “cast out” of the vineyard.

But the death and casting out of the son will not accomplish what the tenants hoped!

9 What will the owner of the vineyard do?

He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

Like Isaiah 5, Jesus asks his hearers to adjudicate the case.

The current tenants will be replaced.

The chief priests and the Sanhedrin will be replaced by the apostles and elders.

Notice that it is not that God will destroy the *vineyard* and plant a new one.

Israel is still God's vineyard.

But no longer will God's vineyard be oppressed by the priests and rabbis.

God will establish new tenants to care for the vineyard.

And Jesus cites Psalm 118 –

the same Psalm that we heard earlier at the Triumphal Entry:

10 Have you not read this Scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

11 this was the Lord's doing,

and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

This seems like a very strange passage to quote in the context of the vineyard theme.

In the parable of the vineyard the son is killed and thrown out.

What “rejected” thing could possibly be in view here?

Of course, after the fact it is easy to see!

Jesus is the stone that was rejected.

The son who was killed and cast out of the vineyard

is the stone which becomes the cornerstone.

If you know the end of the story

then you can see exactly what Jesus and Mark are doing here.

Further, in rabbinic literature scribes and scholars are often referred to as “builders”

(think of Paul's use in 1 Corinthians 3),

which only reinforces the idea of Jesus as the rejected one.

God takes the rejected stone and uses it as the capstone of the new temple –

the cornerstone of the place where he will dwell with his people.

While the chief priests may not have understood everything that Jesus was saying here,

they understand that this parable paints them as the bad guys!

12 And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people,

for they perceived that he had told the parable against them.

So they left him and went away.

So much for Israel's past.

The chief priests, scribes, and elders are history.

God is establishing his kingdom in Jesus.

But what about Caesar?

Rome will not be particularly happy to hear that there is a King in Israel!

2. Israel's Present: The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar (12:13-17)

13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.

The “they” refers back to the chief priests, scribes and elders of 11:27.

They understand that Jesus is making royal claims,
so they want to get him in trouble with Rome.

They send Pharisees and Herodians because that way Jesus is guaranteed trouble:
the Pharisees are the strict ones – they are none too fond of Rome;
the Herodians on the other hand are in bed with Rome.

If Jesus gives an anti-Roman answer, the Herodians will report him to Pilate.

If Jesus gives a pro-Roman answer, the Pharisees will spread the word among the people.

14 And they came and said to him,

*“Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion.
For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.*

What a compliment!

It is true of course! (even though they are just trying to butter him up!)

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?”

A little background on this:

the word for “taxes” here refers specifically to the poll tax.

The poll tax was levied against Roman provinces.

Jesus is a resident of Galilee.

As such he is a subject of King Herod,
and was not subject to the poll tax.

The poll tax had been the cause of a revolt in AD 6,
and helped develop the Zealot movement

(an anti-Roman revolutionary movement in 1st century Judea –
and at least one of Jesus' disciples was a Zealot).

So Jesus is approached as an “outsider” who could provide an “objective” opinion on the subject.

But of course, there is no easy answer to this question!

If he says “yes” then he garners the hatred of Jewish patriots.

If he says “no” then he could be accused of promoting sedition.

But his answer is not just a clever way of getting out of a difficult question.

His answer lays bare the fundamental theological problem with their question!

15 But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them,

“Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”
16 And they brought one.
And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”
They said to him, “Caesar's.”

Why is it important that they produce a denarius?

The denarius was the coinage required for tax payments.
It had a portrait of Tiberius Caesar, along with the inscription,
“son of the divine Augustus.”

For a faithful Jew, this is doubly problematic:
it is a graven image which is identified as divine.

Faithful Jews generally tried to avoid carrying such “idolatrous” imperial money.
So why do these allegedly devout Jews have a denarius on their persons?

*17 Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
and to God the things that are God's.”*
And they marveled at him.

Jesus’ answer cuts through the assumptions of the Zealots.
To serve God does not mean that you must attack Rome.
They had asked him if they should “pay” the tax.
Jesus says that you should “repay” the tax.

The idea is that the denarius belongs to Caesar:
his image and inscription are on it.
For better or worse, you have a debt to Caesar.
You must repay your debts.

But if you are to render to God the things that are God’s –
what has God’s image and inscription on it?

Everything!

I think that it is safe to say that taxes have always been unpopular.
People have always complained about governments that take “my” money.

But Jesus does not accept that premise.
Jesus is not a democrat.
Jesus is not a republican.
Jesus is a monarchist.

Jesus does not say that *everything* belongs to Caesar.
But he does say that this is Caesar’s money.
Caesar’s inscription and image are on it.
If you live in America and use American money,
then you pay American taxes.

Jesus is saying that there is no necessary opposition between Caesar and Christ.
The one who seeks first the kingdom of God will pay his taxes
and will live at peace in Caesar's realm.
But he will have a divided allegiance.
Because while he renders to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
he renders all things to God.

This divided allegiance prompts nervousness at times in the body politic.
Roman emperors did not like the fact that Christians would not say "Caesar is Lord"
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in the 18th century) sought to create a civil religion
entirely subservient to the state.

And there is a tendency in every land to give the nation (or its rulers) divine status.
It is easy to see how the "left" does this in our day.
Political correctness could easily be co-opted into persecution.
And the day may come when those who bow the knee to Jesus
may be persecuted.

But we also need to beware of the *same* danger on the right.

For instance, the new American Patriot's Bible fosters a sort of civil religion as well.
In one of their promotional videos they compare the continental Congress
with Jesus' and his disciples as the "founding fathers."
And then it claims that history repeats itself.

I think that it is safe to say that no orthodox Christian could possibly think
that the continental Congress did anything remotely similar
to what Jesus does with his disciples.
To suggest that the establishment of the Christian religion
is fundamentally similar to the establishment of the American republic
is to deny that Jesus is the Son of God.

It's okay to say that Christian principles were important in the founding of America.
Christian principles were important in the framing of every European government
since the days of Theodosius!

But to say that Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper
were doing anything similar to the continental Congress
is blasphemous.

You might as well say that George and Martha Washington are like Adam and Eve –
Oh, wait, the American Patriot's Bible *does* say that!

Brothers and sisters,
both the far left and the far right have sold out to civil religion –
all that matters to them is America.

All that matters is Caesar.

We must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's –
but we must never forget to render *all things* to God!

3. Israel's Future: The God of Abraham and the Resurrection of the Dead (12:18-27)

Our final episode turns to the future.

18 And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection.

And they asked him a question, saying,

*19 "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife,
but leaves no child, the man must take the widow
and raise up offspring for his brother.*

20 There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring.

21 And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring.

And the third likewise.

22 And the seven left no offspring.

Last of all the woman also died.

23 In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be?

For the seven had her as wife."

This is a great question!

It is rooted in the practice of Levirate marriage in Dt 25:5.

The Sadducees rejected the doctrine of the resurrection
and they think they have a good for it!

After all, it would be absurd for one woman to have seven husbands,
so therefore because the doctrine of the resurrection involves an absurdity,
it cannot be true.

Jesus' answer is infuriating!

It is brilliant, but infuriating.

*24 Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong,
because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?"*

*25 For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage,
but are like angels in heaven.*

We were hoping that Jesus would explain himself a little better!

You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

He refuses to go into detail and give us all the answers we were hoping for!

But he does tell us clearly that marriage and reproduction belong to this age.

The exclusiveness and jealousy which properly belong to marriage in this age
will not exist in the age to come.

Jesus challenges the assumption that the life of the age to come
is exactly like life in this age.

I know that this passage causes some consternation for many.
Many people respond to this by saying “but I love my wife/husband!
I want to spend eternity with her/him!”

My dear congregation,
if you have said or thought this,
then you have given to your spouse the love that belongs only to Jesus.

Do not set your heart on your wife.
Do not set your heart on your husband.

Set your heart on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father.

Marriage is a good thing.
Marriage is a wonderful thing.
But marriage is an earthly thing.
You *may not* set your heart and mind on marriage.
It is a picture of the heavenly – that is true!
But the picture is to draw your heart and mind to the heavenly!

By all means love your wife – your husband – your children –
“love one another as I have loved you” Jesus says.
But that last part is no throw away line –
“as I have loved you”

If your heart is set on earthly things – even so splendid a gift as marriage –
then you will not set your heart on the giver.

I am sure that in the new heavens and the new earth
I will recognize Ginger.
I will be delighted to see her.

But it will be a fundamentally different relationship from the one that we have on earth.
Our relationship on earth is oriented towards making disciples –
both in terms of procreation
and in terms of life together in the church.
In the resurrection we will not be making disciples anymore.

Rather we will be “like the angels.”
(Whatever that means!
I like C. S. Lewis’ suggestion that our bodily experience in the resurrection
will not be a-sexual or a-gastronomic –
but rather it will be trans-gastronomic and trans-sexual –

in other words, our experience will still be physical,
but a glorified physical experience is beyond anything we can currently describe)

But then Jesus turns to the Sadducees underlying theological error:

*26 And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses,
in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying,
'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?*
27 He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong."

Once again, Jesus repudiates the assumptions of his questioners.

Jesus reinterprets the scriptures in a radically new way.

No one had ever suggested that the words "I am the God of A, I and J"
demonstrated the doctrine of the resurrection!

The point here is not merely the verb tense: "I am" –
the point is God's covenant relationship.

God revealed himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
because he is the God of the living.

He was not merely making promises about what would happen to their descendents.

He was promising *them* eternal life as well.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is at the heart of the Christian faith.
We acknowledge this every time we recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creed.
I believe in the resurrection of the body.

The other way to say this is, "I believe in the kingdom of God."

After all, if you say you believe in the kingdom of God without the resurrection,
then you are an idiot!

Kingdom without resurrection is impotence.
Kingdom without resurrection is a dead guy lying in a grave.
Kingdom without resurrection says "go try harder"
in spite of the fact that there is no hope.

If the dead are not raised, then we are the most miserable of men.

What does it mean that Jesus is King?

When you ask yourself that question tomorrow morning,
remember that the answer is: it may be Monday, but Sunday is coming!
The meaning of the Kingdom is the resurrection of the dead.