



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Lord said to my Lord

Luke 20:41-21:4

Fr. William Klock

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The general manager of the company I used to work for had a question he asked when interviewing potential employees: How do you put an elephant in a refrigerator? The answers people give are supposed to tell you something about their personalities, their thinking, and their initiative. Answering that putting an elephant in the refrigerator is impossible—that the refrigerator simply isn't big enough—tells your potential employer that you can't think outside the box, that you lack creativity, and that you probably shouldn't be hired—at least not for a management position. Other answers gave their own insights, but, apparently, the "right" answer is that you simply open the door, put the elephant inside, and close the door. No one said how big the refrigerator is. (The follow-up question is: How do you put a giraffe in the refrigerator? If you think you've got it figured out now and answer that you open the door, put it in, and close the door, you're wrong. Arbitrarily, the refrigerator isn't *that* big. The right answer is that you open the door, take out the elephant, then put in the giraffe, and close the door.)

I mention this because my general manager's question is not that unlike the question that Jesus asks at the end of Luke 20. Look at verses 41-44:

But he said to them, "How can they say that the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the Book of Psalms,

**"The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your
footstool."**

David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?"

Judging from what we've seen so far, there wasn't a soul in Israel who could have answered Jesus' question. To us it sounds like a weird question.

What's does it mean that "The Lord said to my Lord" and what does it mean to be "David's son" and who or what does "David's Lord" refer to and why does any of it matter? It's a question about Jesus' messiahship and it's a question about Jesus' authority. This is why Jesus asks it at this particular point. The people have hailed him as "David's son", he's come to Jerusalem as King, he's upset the temple and rebuked its leaders. As he's been teaching the people in the temple, the scribes and elders and chief priest have repeatedly challenged Jesus: By what right does he think he can do any of this? And Jesus has repeatedly asserted his authority over them and over their temple. He's hinted that their temple is going to be destroyed and replaced with something much better—something centred, built, established on him as the chief cornerstone—and he's declared judgement on the corrupt Jewish leaders who have abused their authority and led the people of God into compromise with the pagans.

They do understand what Jesus has said and done to a point. That's why they're so furious with him. They even understand his claim to be the Messiah, but that's what makes them so angry: Jesus is not doing the things the Messiah was supposed to do! They understood his claim, but they just couldn't accept it. If he was Messiah, he was doing everything wrong. If he was bringing the Lord's kingdom, it wasn't a kingdom they could recognise. The messianic elephant wouldn't fit in their refrigerator. The elephant was too big and the refrigerator too small.

This is a problem that continues to plague people. The majority of Jews, still to this day, reject Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. He doesn't fit their

expectations. But Christians and other modern people struggle with this too. There are many, outside and inside the Church, who can't accept, for example, that Jesus is God. God is just too big to fit into their messianic refrigerator and so to squeeze Jesus in they have to strip him of his divinity. Conservatives, unfortunately, have sometimes responded by affirming so strongly the divinity of Jesus that they strip him of his humanity into order to fit him into their messianic refrigerator. Whichever error we're guilty of, the solution is to let Jesus himself tell us what it means to be the Messiah.

That's just what he does here. And so he starts out in verse 41, asking his disciples (and remember that the Jewish leaders were still there along with the crowds): How can they say—how can people say—that the Christ is David's son?" This is what people said. This is what people believed: that the Messiah—Luke uses the Greek version of the word, Christ—the Messiah is the son of David. Everyone knew this. They knew the promises the Lord had made to David about his throne being established everlastingly. They read Isaiah and they read the Psalms and they knew that the Messiah would be a man descended from David who would rule over the Lord's restored kingdom. The Messiah was the son of David. This wasn't just something that Blind Bartimaeus had figured out and called Jesus. This was something that everyone knew. Their "messianic box" had "son of David" written all over it. The problem was that that box simply wasn't big enough to hold Jesus. And so Jesus quotes a psalm at them. It's the first verse of Psalm 110, words written by David. Here's the entire psalm:

The LORD says to my Lord:

**"Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your
footstool."**

**The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.**

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

**Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.
The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”
The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the way;
therefore he will lift up his head.**
(Psalm 110:1-7)

The psalm is a psalm about the enthronement of the Messiah. It helps if you're looking at the actual text of Psalm 110 so that you can see that the agent in the Psalm—the one who says, the one who sends, the one who swears all of this—is the LORD in all capitals. Originally the Hebrew text said *Yahweh*, Israel's God. He calls the Messiah to a position of lordship, to sit at his own right hand until he puts all of his enemies under his feet. The Lord, Israel's God, gives the Messiah his sceptre, authority to bring his enemies into submission. This Messiah will “shatter kings” and “he will execute judgement among the nations”. If you've read your Bible all of this should sound just like the Messiah. Our “messianic boxes” should be able to contain all of this. And that's because Psalm 110 was to the single Old Testament passage most quoted by the writers of the New Testament when they described the person of the Messiah. It's in Mark and Matthew and John. It's in Paul and in Peter, in the book of Hebrews and in Revelation. The only New Testament writer who doesn't mention it is John. Long before the church councils were called to resolve all of

the disputes and heresies about who Jesus is and long before the creeds were written to hammer it out for us, Jesus quoted Psalm 110 to these people who couldn't fit him into their box. Psalm 110 is one of the fundamental passages to understand if we're to have a New Testament Christology—a biblical understanding of who Jesus is as the Messiah.

If Psalm 110 is that important in the New Testament and if Jesus cited it so authoritatively that day in the temple, you might think that it was an important passage about the Messiah for the Jews of Jesus' day. The remarkable thing is that it wasn't. We have all sorts of Jewish literature from the period—what's called “Second Temple Judaism”, spanning the time from the Jews' return from exile in Babylon five hundred years before Jesus, up to the destruction of the temple forty years later. Nothing in that literature even hints that anyone ever looked to Psalm 110 in order to understand who the Messiah would be. Nothing. And this is precisely why they couldn't accept Jesus and his claims. This is why they rejected his authority. They were missing this enormous piece of the messianic picture.

The Messiah isn't simply to be a new earthly king like David only more powerful. No. The Messiah was both David's son *and* David's Lord. The Messiah, he's saying, is the *divine* King—he's not just called and given authority by the Lord and he's not just the Lord's representative on earth—somehow and in some fashion he is himself the God of Israel. That knocks the bottom out of their messianic box or the blows the back out of their messianic refrigerator. There are two things here, especially, that explain why Jesus had disrupted the temple and rebuked its leaders and that explain why he had authority to do it. First, in verse 4, the psalmist describes this “lord” as “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek”. Melchizedek was the

king-priest whom Abraham had met in Jerusalem. We don't know much about him, but for the biblical writers he became an image of the ideal king, who was also priest of God Most High and the priest of God Most High who was also a king. He was there, ruling and ministering in Jerusalem long before Abraham or any of his descendants or even King David or his son, King Solomon, had even built the Lord's temple. And the psalmist describes the Messiah as taking on that role: he is the priest who is also King and he's the King who is also the priest and as king and priest, like Melchizedek, he has priestly and ruling authority that goes back long before and that supersedes the authority of the corrupt men ruling the temple. The second point is that Psalm 110 adds the Lord's enthronement of the Messiah to the messianic picture. This priest-king is enthroned by the God of Israel himself and he's enthroned to carry out his mission—to establish his kingdom and to put down and to judge the enemies of the Lord and of the Lord's people.

And who are those enemies? If you'd asked most people that day, they would have said it was the Romans. But it shouldn't come as a surprise that if you get the Messiah wrong and if you get the kingdom of God wrong, you'll probably end up getting his enemies wrong too. In fact, you might discover that *you are* the enemy. Jesus points to the leaders right there in the temple—the men glaring at him from the back of the crowd. Look at verses 45-47:

And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

In contrast to the Lord's messianic King who rode into Jerusalem in humility on a donkey. In contrast to the messianic King who will establish his kingdom by giving his life for the sake of his people. The current religious authorities in Israel do everything for their own gain. Jesus singles out the scribes because they were the legal authorities of Israel. They may not have been the ones actually in power, but they were the ones who enabled the corrupt leaders. The scribes were the interpreters of the law. They made sure the law was interpreted in such a way as to justify the corruption and compromise of the Sadducees. They were the rich and powerful men working behind the scenes. And they were well-respected by most. They loved that. They enjoyed parading around in clothes that let everyone know their status as scribes. They loved the respect and adulation they received. They loved being asked to sit in the place of honour, whether it was at a banquet or in the synagogue. Again, they were the men who interpreted God's law for Israel. The Lord met with his people in the temple, but it was the scribes who established how the temple was run and how the lord was worshiped there. In that sense they, just like the priests, were the mediators between God and the men and women of Israel. If you wanted to come before the Lord, you had to do it the way the scribes told you to. That's a heavy responsibility. And Jesus exposes them for exploiting their position at the expense of the people. They offer long and holy-sounding prayers while they devour the houses of widows—of the poorest of the poor.

Jeremiah, centuries before, had condemned the priests for denying justice to widows and orphans. The tithes paid by the people of Israel were given not only for the support of the priesthood, but also for the care of widows and orphans—for the care of those who were otherwise completely destitute. And yet the historian,

Josephus, tells us that the chief priests didn't even take care of their own. Some of the ruling priests sent their thugs to the threshing floors to steal the grain tithes allotted to the ordinary, rank-and-file priests who were left to starve.¹ These were the men called to represent and minister on behalf the God who describes himself in Deuteronomy 10:18 as one who "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." Instead, they were using their position to rob the people in the name of the Lord. Imagine what that did to the Lord's reputation, not only amongst the poor in Israel, but amongst the pagans who saw this corruption in action.

At this point just such a widows comes along. Look at verses 1-4 of Chapter 21:

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

The Mishnah says that there were thirteen chests in the court of the temple. Some of them were designated for specific tithes and offerings and some for free-will offerings.² As Jesus was teaching people would have been coming and going, many of them dropping coins into the trumpet-shaped openings in these treasury chests. Some of the people were rich and they dropped in silver and gold coins, but Jesus points out one woman in particular: a widow. She was probably easy to identify because of her clothing. Maybe Jesus had interacted with her during the week. Whatever the case, he pointed

her out as a widow—one of the poorest of the poor. Think of the woman in his parable who had the wedding headdress made of ten little silver coins and how, in her poverty, she panicked when one of those coins went missing. Or think of Naomi in the book of Ruth. Her husbands and sons died, leaving her and her daughters-in-law destitute. There was no provision for them in pagan Moab, so she and Ruth returned to Israel where the Lord—again, the God executes justice for the fatherless and the widow—provided for the poor with a law prohibiting harvesters from making second passes over their fields and orchards. Anything remaining after that first pass, fruit still on the vine or grain that had fallen to the ground, was to be left for the poor to glean. As a widow that's how destitute Naomi was. She relied on her daughter-in-law to glean grain in the fields of others.

Jesus points out this woman to his disciples and to the shame of the scribes as she drops two small copper coins into one of the collection boxes. Luke describes these coins as *lepta*—the smallest coin minted. It took more than a hundred of them to equal a day's wages for a typical labourer. If she were lucky she might have been able to buy a handful of flour with that much money, but instead she puts it into the temple treasury.

On the one hand, Jesus commends her for her sacrifice. The rich gave out of their abundance. The Greek word also means "surplus". In other words, they gave much more, but they were giving out of what was left over after they'd spent their money. For many of them it had little meaning, and most them wouldn't miss it. But, Jesus says, the widow gave out of her poverty—out of her "lack". She had no surplus from which to give. Her offering meant going without—it took the food out of her mouth. Her offering shows true sacrifice and true devotion to the Lord. This is the kind of commitment and the kind of faith on which the

¹ *Antiquities* 20.8.8

² *m. Seq.* 6:5

kingdom of God is built. The Greek is very profound. Jesus tells them that she gave her whole life in those two coins. He uses the word *bios*—it's the word for "life"; we get "biology" from it: the study of life. She gave everything she had for life and in that she points to the kingdom and she points to Jesus who will give his own life at the Cross. That's the kingdom. The rich people were sure of their place in the kingdom as they gave of their surplus. The poor widow probably felt self-conscious and inadequate for the kingdom giving so little, but Jesus points to her: There's the kingdom—it's exemplified by those who give everything.

But on the other hand, as commendable as this woman's actions are, it's just another example of the way the scribes and the religious leaders are abusing the poor and devouring widows' houses. Again, they were the interpreters of the law. They were the gatekeepers of the temple. The system they had mediated to this poor woman and so many others like her, callously demanded that she give her life, that she starve, in order to worship her Lord in the temple. Like today's televangelists and prosperity hucksters, promising God's blessing in return for financial contributions, the scribes and the Jewish religious leaders were fleecing the very sheep whom the Lord had entrusted to their care. The truly sad thing about it all was that no one seemed to care. If Jesus hadn't noticed the poor widow dropping in her two little coins no one else would have. But everyone noticed the wealthy and the solid sounds made when their gold and silver fell into the treasury boxes. Just as their thinking on the nature of the Messiah was wrong, their thinking on the nature of his kingdom was wrong. They couldn't fit Jesus the Messiah into their messianic boxes, but neither could they fit the poor widow in either. The kingdom was for those who did great things for God: for people who wore long and

ostentatious robes, who prayed long and profound prayers, and who gave large sums of money to the temple. It wasn't for outsiders and it wasn't for the poor—and even if the devout poor, like this widow, made it in, the kingdom wasn't really about them. The Lord would surely make room for them, but it was the important, the rich, the powerful who would be seated at his table. As in this age, so in the age to come, the Lord would be gracious to feed the poor with his crumbs, so they thought. And yet as Jesus shows, the kingdom is exemplified by people like this woman who gave her livelihood in faith to the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus warns us here too. He is as much Lord today as he was then. As he judged Israel so he will one day judge the Church. Does our messianic box account for that? I think that too often we think of the Messiah as one who pats us on the back and gives us a thumbs-up for our piety while we live ostentatiously and with little thought for the poor and for outsiders and for people lost in darkness. Does our church reflect the values and priorities of Jesus or the values and priorities of the world? Do we take pride in the offerings we give out of our abundance, thinking that we've earned a place at Jesus Table? Or do we come in humility to his Table, knowing that apart from him we are unworthy so much as to gather up the crumbs. He has given his life for us. Our desire ought to be to give back our own—not just our money, but everything, for his sake and for him to use for his kingdom.

Ask, too, as a church whom do we court? I've known churches and pastors and congregations that court the wealthy and the beautiful and the successful, while ignoring the poor and destitute and broken. I don't think we're that kind of church, but do we actively seek out the poor and the broken to tell them that Jesus is Lord and to show them what that looks like? The typical church here in North

America is filled with middle-class families and retirees and even when we don't mean to, we often send the message to single people that they don't belong. To the outsider we give the impression that we've got it all together—that the Church is for happy people with happy families, clean clothes, full bellies, and enough money left over to give some back to God—just like the rich people dropping their silver and gold into the temple treasury. Whether consciously or not, we leave grace out of that image—as if we were never broken and in need of the Saviour ourselves. We need to be open and honest about our own need of Jesus. Consciously or not, we send the message to people who are poor and broken that they need to solve their problems, get some nice clothes, fix their broken families, join our social circle before they can feel welcome in Jesus' Church. Why? Because we put forward an image that we have it all together and that we are not broken and struggling in our own ways. Brothers and sisters, the humility we express in the liturgy, in the Confession and in the Prayer of Humble Access should be apparent in our lives as we give ourselves and our all in ways that express our gratitude for the undeserved mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness we poor sinners have received from Jesus; as we give our lives for sake of others as Jesus has given his life for us.