



**LIVING WORD  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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**A Sermon for the Eighteenth  
Sunday after Trinity  
St. Matthew 22:34-46  
Fr. William Klock**

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The theologian Karl Barth is said to have once replied to an interviewer, “The answer is Jesus, now what’s the question.” Everything eventually went back to Jesus for him, nothing was ever about Professor Barth. He was once asked when he was saved. He replied: A.D. 33. It wasn’t about him; everything was about Jesus. Despite his shortcomings, Barth knew that Jesus is the centre of, the answer to everything.

And, Brothers and Sisters, this is why it’s so important we understand who Jesus is. We have the Nicene Creed—and the Athanasian Creed, for that matter—because there were those in the Church who got Jesus wrong. Arius, for example, denied that Jesus is God. That was the hot issue in the early Fourth Century and one of the reasons why the Council of Nicaea was called—and why the men there drafted the first version of the creed we still recite every Sunday seventeen hundred years later. Who is Jesus? He is “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.” As true as all these statements are, as useful as they have been in guarding the Church from heresy these many centuries, this is not the language of the Bible. It’s the language of the Greek philosopher Plato, whose teaching had been revived and repopularised by a man named Plotinus about seventy-five years before the Council of Nicaea met. The Church Fathers of that time latched onto the language and categories of this “Neoplatonism” to express the truths of important doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation. But this was something new. The writers of the New Testament,

men like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter never turned to philosophy, let alone pagan philosophers, to explain who Jesus is. They followed precisely where Jesus had trod before them and drew, again not on philosophy, but on the imagery and narrative of Israel’s scriptures—on the Old Testament. And our Gospel lesson today is one of the greatest of these passages, recorded by Matthew and quoting Jesus himself.

The passage, again Matthew 22:34-46, comes near the end of Jesus’ ministry. It records another of his disputes with the Pharisees, this time in Jerusalem during that final week that led him to the cross. That week began with his triumphal entry into the city and his cleansing of the temple. It follows on the heels of that encounter he had with the Sadducees—the one where they asked him about a hypothetical woman who outlived seven different husbands. If the resurrection of the dead is truly our hope, they asked—and remember they were the ones who didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead—then to which of those seven husbands will she be married in the age to come? It was a silly question meant to trap Jesus and he famous responded and shut them down saying that the God of Abraham is not the god of the dead, but of the living. And that’s the end of Jesus’ disputes with the Sadducees. They’ve got nothing more to say. Our Gospel passage follows immediately. Matthew writes in verse 34:

**But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.**

Now it’s the Pharisees turn to be shut down by Jesus. This will be his last dispute with them. The next chapter, Chapter 23, is a long denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. It’s the beginning of the end. They’ve been shut down by Jesus at every turn and now go off to plot to have Jesus killed. But in both disputes Jesus draws on Israel’s story to explain who he is and what it means that he’s the Messiah. So let’s continue with this final dispute with the Pharisees. Look at verses 35 and 36:

**And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”**

The Sadducees took issue with Jesus over his teaching about resurrection. The Pharisees took issue with Jesus over his approach to the law. They’d counted up all of the Lord’s commandments to Israel and the total came to 613. From what I read, there was apparently debate, at least in some circles, about which commandment was the most important. I think, though, that the Pharisees had this one figured out pretty well. Israel’s “creed”—and her daily prayer, and still her daily prayer as part of her liturgies for morning and evening prayer—was the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” And it goes on, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” These Pharisees, however, seem to have expected Jesus to say something else. I’m not sure what they expected. They just expected that whatever he said about the law would be wrong. But look at what he says in verses 37-40:

**And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”**

And there’s nothing here the Pharisees can argue about. Jesus gives the right answer. And yet even though it’s the right answer, even though the Pharisees couldn’t disagree with it leaves them condemned—and, once again, fuming. They’d watched Jesus for three years and what made them so angry about him and about his ministry is that he didn’t *do* the law right. He healed on the Sabbath. He declared people clean and bypassed the priests. He forgave sins and bypassed the temple and sacrificial system. And yet when they ask him what’s most important about the law, he gives the same answer they would have. And that really strikes back at them. What if they’re the ones who are doing

the law all wrong? What if the new thing that will transform Israel, the thing the Lord had promised, what if it really is happening in Jesus? Through the Prophets the Lord had promised that one day he would set his people to rights so that they would be able to really and truly live the law—something they'd failed to do over and over and over. The Pharisees expected the Messiah would be the one to set Israel to rights, but they also saw themselves as the ones preparing the way for him with their teaching on the law. Jesus' statement here subtly—or maybe not so subtly—is a statement of his Messiahship and yet another call to the Pharisees to repent, because they've got it wrong. It's call to get in line with the new thing that Israel's God is doing in their midst. So they can't argue with Jesus' answer, but they're still convinced he's wrong. They're left frustrated and fuming.

So in the first part of our Gospel, Jesus gives them the answer they dare not question, but then he in turn asks them a question that they dare not answer—as Bp. Wright puts it. With his answer about the law it seems like Jesus has shut up the Pharisees as soundly as he had shut up the Sadducees, but Jesus knew there was one more point that needed to be made. What they understood of the person and ministry of the Messiah was just as important to the Pharisees as how they understood the law. And so Jesus goes on to tie the two together. Look at verses 41 and 42:

**Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the [Messiah]? Whose son is he?"**

If the answer to their question points to the ministry of the Messiah, then it makes sense next to ask just who they think this Messiah is or will be. To be more specific, Jesus gets points in the right direction with that odd question about whose son they think the Messiah is. He knew very well what their answer would be if he put the question to them that way. Everyone knew that the Messiah was—or would be—the son of David. In fact, that was one of the

Messianic titles. And the Pharisees answer just as we'd expect.

**They said to him, "The son of David."**

And now Jesus responds with what may be one of his most enigmatic sayings. I remember reading this passage many times when I was growing up and knowing that it had to do with Jesus being God or something like that, but never really understanding how he really made his point—until in my late teens I discovered there are these great books called "commentaries" that our pastor had in his office and they're great at explaining things like background and context—or in this case explaining that Jesus was quoting from Psalm 110. They knew the psalms by heart. Most of us don't and so we often need someone to make these connections for us. (If you want another good reason to pray the Daily Office—Morning and Evening Prayer—it's that it will help you internalise the Psalter so you'll be more likely to recognise it in passages like this.) And the more I studied and, especially, the more I've come to look at Jesus in light of the Old Testament, the more profound I've realised his question to the Pharisees really is.

So in saying that the Messiah is the son of David they give the right answer—but it's not the whole answer. And so Jesus replies in verses 43-45:

**"How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"?" If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"**

It's that "The Lord said to my Lord" bit that's confusing here. Again, it helps if we know that Jesus is quoting from Psalm 110. It's the most oft-quoted Psalm in the New Testament. And if we go back to it you'll see that in our English Bibles the first "Lord" is in small caps. That means that this is the "Lord" that refers to God. It's the title the Jews used instead of saying the divine name that was given to Moses:

Yahweh, "I am". This important distinction between Lord and Lord is lost in the Greek version, which is what Matthew quotes from. But if we understand this, then the passage starts to make more sense. Instead of "The Lord said to my Lord," it's "Yahweh said to my Lord". It's not just any two "lords" here; it's Yahweh, the God of Israel addressing someone. That makes more sense, doesn't it? But we still might not know who "my Lord", the second "Lord" refers to.

At this point, let's just look at the whole psalm. Again, this is Psalm 110. Go ahead and turn there. It's titled "A Psalm of or to or for David".

**Yahweh says to my Lord:**

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

**Yahweh 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.**

**Yahweh has sworn**

**and will not change his mind,  
"You are a priest forever  
after the order of Melchizedek."**

**Yahweh 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.**

So, first, "my Lord" is David. The psalm is addressed to David, maybe written by a court musician or possibly a prophet like Nathan. David is his Lord, his King, and he sings of what the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, has promised to King David. There's no reason to think that this was intended to be a messianic psalm when it was written. It speaks of God's promises to

David. Yahweh, the Lord, seats him in a place of honour and gives him his sceptre—think of Samuel going out to anoint the lowly shepherd son of Jesse. The Lord will give him victory over his enemies. David was not of the priestly tribe of Levi, but the Lord, in making him King in Jerusalem (Zion), gives him the priesthood of Melchizedek, the priest-king of Jerusalem in the days of Abraham—and that kingly authority will be forever. But then things are reversed. As Yahweh has seated David at his right hand, now Yahweh places himself at David's right hand to give him victory, to make him the instrument of his judgement and wrath on the nations.

It's not hard to see how, many years later, this psalm came to embody the messianic hopes of Israel. In a time when no son of David was on the throne and Israel was governed by fake Jews like Herod and foreign pagans like the Romans, the people looked to the promises of this psalm for hope. The people longed for the son of David to return. David's throne—his kingly line—as the psalm implies, was to stand forever. The people longed for the day when their God would judge the nations and so they sang this psalm in hopeful longing, sure of God's faithfulness and looking for the day when the son of David would come with might to take up his throne. Like so many others in Israel, this was the hope of the Pharisees. When they spoke of the Messiah as the son of David, they were looking forward to the great king who would come to bring God's judgement and to defeat the nations.

But this gets back to Jesus' answer to their question in the first part of the passage—the answer that pointed to the ministry of the Messiah that would finally set right the hearts of the people, that would finally enable them to truly love God and neighbour. If the son of David is just a king who comes to crush the nations, what does that do to solve the heart problem of God's people? How does it solve the problem of sin and Israel's inability to keep the law?

So Jesus plays off the way in which this psalm had come to embody messianic hopes and that it was commonly attributed to David. They understood the psalm to be about the son of David—the Messiah—and Jesus says, “Well, okay, that's all well and good, but there's more, because if in composing the psalm David refers to the central figure—the one you identify as his son—but calls him “my Lord”, how can that be? How can the Messiah be David's son and David's lord (his master) at the same time?”

Jesus is, in fact, the son of David, but here he draws in another identification that we see throughout Matthew's gospel. Do you remember when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was? That's in Matthew 16. And Peter responded, “You are the [Messiah], the son of the living God”. That was another option the Pharisees could have given in answer to Jesus' question. There was more than one facet to the Messiah, but hardly anyone was putting them all together.

The son of David is the great king, the one who will come in judgement to set all to rights by crushing the enemies of the people. But there's also the son of the living God. In Matthew's gospel the son of the living God is the representative of Israel. This title, too, is drawn from the Old Testament Prophets. This son will fulfil the Lord's purposes for Israel where Israel has consistently failed. This is the son who was called out of Egypt—remember how Joseph and Mary fled Herod? This is the beloved son, the anointed servant of God—remember Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Spirit on him? This is the Israel who is obedient in the wilderness, who is consistently faithful to the Lord and to his commands—remember Jesus tempted by the devil? This is the son of God who acts to make peace—remember the sermon on the mount and Jesus' statement, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be sons of God”? This is the son of God who is tempted to abandon his servanthood, first in the wilderness, then at the cross, but is faithful both times.

Eventually, Matthew brings the son of the living God and the son of David together as Jesus stands before the high priest, Caiaphas. “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” he demands. And Jesus responds, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Jesus brings together both of these “sons” in his answer. He brings together the son of the living God story about the one who will stand as Israel's representative, as the servant who will suffer for the sake of his people, and the story we see in Psalm 110 of the son of David, the great king who will rule over the nations with the authority of the God of Israel. When we put these stories together we see Jesus as the Lord's anointed servant, the son who humbles himself to represent the people, and who, because he has suffered and died, will be raised to God's right hand where he will reign as both king and judge. That's what upset the high priest—Jesus' claim that he would sit as judge over the leaders of Israel with the authority of the God of Israel.

But our Gospel lesson today, this final dispute with the Pharisees, is part of the story that gets us from Peter's confession that Jesus is the son of the living God to Jesus' claim before the high priest. Who is Jesus? Jesus himself draws on the narrative of the people of God. He is the son of God who will represent the people in his suffering and death and he is the son of David, not just by birth, but because it will be on account of his suffering and death that he will be raised to rule at the right hand of God.

And, of course, this also redirects the people to the real source of their problems. When they limited the identity of the Messiah to the son of David, they saw the gentiles, the nations, people like the Romans as their enemies—people the king could put to death with his sword and his army. But when we bring in the son of God, the suffering servant, who dies and rises again, we see that what he's really come to defeat is are enemies common to Jew

and gentile alike: sin and death. The Romans, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Edomites, the Egyptians—the nations—were never really the real problem and destroying them was never really the solution. Sin and death are the enemies—and they're the common enemy of all humanity. And so it's then through this dual identity—both son of God and son of David—that Jesus opens the way for the salvation not only of Israel, but of the nations.

Matthew ends the passage in verse 46:

**And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.**

Jesus shut down the Pharisees once and for all. The next we see of them, they're plotting to have him killed. And, of course, if they'd really understood what Jesus was getting at here, maybe they'd have thought twice. Instead they help Jesus to fulfil his role as suffering servant. They didn't really understand. Neither did the disciples. Not at that point, anyway. But that would change once Jesus has been raised from death and had ascended to the right hand of his Father. Ten days later the Spirit descended on his disciples, just as he'd promised—not just as Jesus had promised, but just as the Lord had promised through the Prophets centuries before—and then they understood. David died and was buried, but Jesus rose from death and is seated at the right hand of God. Let me close with what Peter preached that day:

**“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the [Messiah], that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received**

**from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.””**

**Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and [Messiah], this Jesus whom you crucified.”** (Acts 2:29-36)

Let's pray: Almighty God, gracious Father, we give you thank for your promises and for your faithfulness to them. We think today especially of your promises to David and the Prophets that gave them a hope for your Messiah. He is both David's son and your own son, the true Israel, and in him we have forgiveness of sins and the life of your kingdom. We pray that as we live the life he gives, we would also live in hope, knowing your faithfulness and trusting in your promises, and joyfully expecting—and participating in—the work your Church, empowered by Jesus and the Spirit as we look forward to your renewal of all things. Amen.