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The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity: What do you think about the Messiah?

St. Matthew 22:34-46

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I used to have a boss who prided himself on finding creative employees who were good at thinking outside the box. When he interviewed them he'd always ask weird questions like, "How do you put an elephant in a refrigerator?" (The correct answer is, apparently, "You open the door and put him in," because no one said how big the refrigerator was. Or he'd hand the prospective employee a big balloon and a small box and ask them to fit the balloon into the box. The solution to that one was to let enough air out of the balloon that it would fit in the box. Extra points if, instead of untying it, which a lot of people with big fingers couldn't manage, you pulled a pin from the bulletin board a few feet away and poked the thick spot just under the knot, where the balloon wouldn't pop. That might be a good solution in a job interview, but it's also just the kind of the solution a lot of people take when they're confronted with Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" The full answer doesn't fit in our box, so we let some air out of the balloon. We leave out Jesus' divinity. Or we leave out his call to repentance and his demand for holiness. Or we cut out all the things he said about judgement so that we're just left with the warm-fuzzies. However we do it, if our solution is to let some of the air out of the balloon, what we're left with isn't the real Jesus—and we inevitably end up with a false gospel to go along with it.

In our gospel today Jesus asks this same question of a group of Pharisees. The Sadducees had just confronted

Jesus with what they thought was a "gotcha" question and Jesus turned it back on them, leaving them nothing to say. And now the Pharisees have their turn. Look again at Matthew 22:34. Matthew writes:

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

This will be his last dispute with the Pharisees. 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 will go off to plot to have him killed. But first, Matthew tells us:

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 the resurrection of the dead. 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. There was some debate about which commandment was the most important, but for the most part, the Pharisees had this one figured out. Israel's "creed"—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, and that leaves them frustrated and fuming.

Here's why. Think of it this way. As Christians, as Jesus' people, we know that when he rose from the dead, Jesus inaugurated a new age and God's new creation. It isn't consummated or fully here yet, but one day it will be. In the meantime, we're the royal heralds of the Messiah, the King, called to live out the life and values of the kingdom here and now in the midst of the world's brokenness and to proclaim that he will come again one day to finish what he has started—to call people to repentance and faith in preparation for the Messiah and God's new world. Consider that the Pharisees thought of themselves in a very similar way. The Messiah would come to set things to rights and they were the ones heralding his return and calling the people to repentance—to a better and more rigorous observance of the *torah*—in anticipation of the Messiah's coming. They were, in so many ways, on the right track. But their vision of the kingdom and the Messiah was just too small, too narrow. It only included Israel and it misunderstood the purpose of the *torah*. It was like they'd let half the air out of their Messiah balloon.

So Jesus and the Pharisees agree on this question. They agree—at least on the surface—about the law: Love God. Love your neighbour. But how they do that is different from how Jesus does that and they know it. That's why they're so frustrated with him. They know that they and Jesus can't both be right. Jesus' answer, in effect, is saying to them: You're not loving God as you should. And you're not loving your neighbours as you should either. Jesus' is subtly—or maybe not so subtly—once again asserting his

Messiahship, while call the Pharisees to repentance—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 this 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—at least that’s how Bp. Wright rather brilliantly 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 about the law points to the ministry of the Messiah, then it makes sense next to ask just who they think this Messiah is or will be. So Jesus points them 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 it’s the right answer. Jesus has a way of showing everyone that they’re on familiar ground, and then using that to show how they’re looking at things through the wrong lens. “Son of

David” is the right answer, but now Jesus has to show them that this doesn’t mean what they think it means—or, at least, that how they understand it isn’t the whole picture. 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?”

That “The Lord said to my Lord” bit can be confusing. 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 capitals. 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,” we can read it, “Yahweh said to my Lord”. It’s not just any two “lords” here; it’s Yahweh, the God of Israel addressing someone. But who is that someone? Who is “my Lord” referring 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 and the people knew that the Lord is faithful to his promises. 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. The Pharisees sang this psalm, too, and longed for the Messiah. This was their hope. 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? This *should* have been on the Pharisees' radar. They, of all people, knew how Israel struggled to be faithful. They of all people knew how desperately Israel needed a change of heart.

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. Again, think back to Matthew 16 and Jesus' question to Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” 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, a few chapters later, 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,” the high priest 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. Jesus will be the King, because he was first the servant, and as King he will judge his people by that servant standard.

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. The Pharisees—and so many other people in Israel—they wanted the King, but the servant wasn't on their radar—and without grasping that Israel was called and created to be a servant people, they could never really understand—not *really*—what it meant to love God and to love neighbour.

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 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 of your Church, empowered by Jesus and the Spirit as we look forward to your renewal of all things. Amen.