

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 30”

Matthew 12:15-21

The last time we looked at this Gospel of Matthew, we saw that Jesus, having once again offered a different way of looking at things – particularly looking at the Law of Moses and how it is interpreted – has come up against the Pharisees as a result. We’ve already encountered these dons and doctors, these gatekeepers of religion and sanctimonious policemen of the Law and they have always been described by Matthew as being in opposition to Jesus and all that he seems to stand for. Their opposition has now gone a step further and they start to conspire to get rid of Jesus, finally and definitively. They want to kill him (v14).

So Jesus takes his own advice – the advice he has given to his newly commissioned band of followers in 10:14 – and he beats a strategic retreat. He does have to die – that’s the main reason for his coming into this world – but not yet. God has his plans and the timing is immaculate. Now is not the time for Jesus’ sacrifice to take place: he has much more to teach and to do before he treads the road from Jerusalem to the hill of Golgotha and the waiting cross. So Matthew tells us that “*he withdrew from that place*”. This is not the occasion to be reckless, even for the Kingly Messiah.

But as he withdraws, the crowds follow him. They are not really concerned about the niceties of the Law nor are they particularly fond of theological disputes. They’ve seen what Jesus can do. They’ve experienced some of this new Kingdom action and they want a bit more of it. It’s usually like that for the vast majority of people. Arguments and debates won’t win them over to the cause of Christ – but show them the difference Jesus can make in someone’s life and they’ll really prick up their ears. And Jesus continues to do that for them. “*He healed all their sick,*” writes Matthew. The people with real needs – the diseased, the disabled, the discarded – Jesus touches them and makes a difference to their lives.

Of course, the first thing they’ll do is go around telling everyone what’s happened, but Jesus asks them to try and keep it all hush-hush for a bit. He doesn’t really want to antagonise the Pharisees and the authorities any further just at the moment. Nor does he want the people to hail him as the Messiah, because he hasn’t really had an opportunity to explain to them what the Messiah is all about. This is not the occasion to be too talkative, even about the Kingly Messiah.

And Matthew picks up on this. Still eager to convince his first Jewish Christian readers that it’s OK to believe in Jesus because he is the fulfilment of all their Scriptures, the culmination of all the promises and preaching of the Old Testament prophets and poets, he offers them yet another quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures. This lengthy quotation from the prophet Isaiah – the longest quotation he uses in this gospel – highlights in the most explicit way yet the character of the Kingly Messiah. And through these words from *Isaiah 42:1-4*, which Matthew’s translation amends very slightly, the evangelist shows what a huge contrast there is with the usually accepted profile of a King.

The first few lines (v18) remind us once again that there is no doubt in Matthew’s mind that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah. Taken from the part of Isaiah’s prophecy that is often referred to as *The Servant Songs*, these words are used by Matthew to identify Jesus as God’s chosen servant. This servant would have his calling affirmed by being anointed, the Hebrew word for which is “*messiah*” – the anointed one. And the Greek translation of that is “*christos*”, the Christ. On its own, though, that’s not necessarily enough, so Matthew’s quotation continues with a reminder that this is “*the one I love, in whom I delight*”. We’ve already come across that in 3:17: as Jesus comes up out of the water at his baptism, a voice is heard from heaven which says, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*”

And finally in this verse comes the description of the Messiah, the Christ, as being filled with the Holy Spirit – “*I will put my Spirit on him*”. That was really what the anointing was designed to symbolise – God’s chosen servant equipped with the Spirit of God in order to carry out the calling which he had been given. Matthew clearly wants his readers to realise that this person is, indeed, the promised Messiah, the one who was to be expected by his people, and who would proclaim to all peoples – “*the nations*” here is

the word *ethnoi* which refers mainly to the Gentiles – the justice of God. In his account of Jesus' life, Matthew's fellow evangelist Luke records Jesus using more words from Isaiah – *Isaiah 61* this time – to demonstrate that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit to announce a new dawn of justice and righteousness for everyone.

So far, so good. But the people had very clear ideas of what they expected their Messiah to be like. They had a picture of this Messiah in their mind's eye which blurred into a picture of an earthly King, a ruler in the mould of their amazing King David. Their Messiah would be someone wielding power, leading armies, overthrowing enemies and generally being mighty. R T France writes about "*the aggressive Messiah of popular expectation*". But, just as we've already seen in other ways, Jesus subverts all that popular expectation. He hasn't come to play by the rules. His Kingdom is something so different from what people are used to and from what they want that the King will need to be very different indeed. So Matthew uses the negatives of *vv19,20* to stress what this King will not be like. And sometimes we need to be reminded of these words even today, especially when we find ourselves getting carried away with ideas of Jesus as simply being like all the other world rulers but just stronger, more ruthless, more victorious. This Kingly Messiah, this anointed servant won't fit the mould, won't go along with our human expectations. This is not the Kingly Messiah who crusades against the infidels, who bombs abortion clinics, who waves banners in the faces of the legislators. This is a Kingly Messiah who wields unimaginable power in the gentlest way possible.

Matthew reminds us that he will not quarrel. He's not going to pick fights and be confrontational, like the sabre-rattling leaders of the world's armies. He will not always be crying out and making a noise. The word Matthew uses here to translate Isaiah's word for "*cry out*" is the Greek word *kraugazo*. It's onomatopoeic – it's supposed to sound like a crow: brash, irritating, aggressive – to give the idea of someone wanting to pick a fight. William Barclay says that it is "*the word used of a barking dog, the croaking of a raven, the bawling of a drunken man, the uproar of a discontented audience in a theatre*". This Kingly Messiah will not be shouting out in the streets – a self-publicist who wants to let everyone know he's around. He will not get involved with trying to see who can shout the loudest, who has the best PR: no sound bites or expensive commercials. His character, his actions and his policies will speak for themselves.

And those actions and policies will mean that the already broken will not be further crushed. Those who are vulnerable will not be trampled on. His appeal will not be simply to the rich and self-satisfied, but more to the poor and the broken, whom he will nurture and encourage. This will be a Kingly Messiah of quiet compassion, who focuses on the weak and the fragile. For those of you who watch the television, he will be more like *The Secret Millionaire* than Alan Sugar.

In the eyes of the world – eyes that have been trained to look at everyone and everything through the spectacles of competition and confrontation – this Kingly Messiah is a failure. He is a weak and powerless leader who can accomplish nothing of worth. But Matthew's quotation from Isaiah states that "*he leads justice to victory*". This is not about the accumulation of wealth, of power; it's not about militarism, fame, celebrity. It's about justice – the divine justice of a benevolent Creator rather than the vengeance and retribution of the world's leaders. And, in the final analysis, that justice will triumph, it will win out over all other values and attitudes. All things will come together as God wills. His great plan for his creation – and for humanity within it – which has been derailed by the sin and selfishness of countless generations of humans, will be put back on track through the work of Jesus the Christ. The Kingly Messiah will win out in the end.

So, says Matthew, this is the one who can truly bring hope. As Eugene Peterson translates this final line of Matthew's quotation, "*the mere sound of his name will signal hope*". And that is for everyone. Once again we have that word "*nations*" – *ethnoi*, the Gentiles. Everyone can stake their hope on the reputation of this quiet, compassionate, just Messiah. And we've said this many times before, but the way this word "*hope*" is used here – as elsewhere in the New Testament – signals a confident expectation. Because of Jesus everyone can look forward with confidence to God's plans being fulfilled.

As one of the big theological dictionaries puts it, *“in the NT the words [for hope] never indicate a vague or fearful anticipation but always the expectation of something good.”*

So this is the King we follow. This is a Kingly Messiah who is counter-cultural, who doesn't do things the way everyone expects – with a lot of noise and hullabaloo, with pomp and ceremony, with shouting and shrieking. This is a Kingly Messiah who follows God's way and, in turn, leads his own followers – you and me – in the ways that God has set out. He does not engage with the world on its terms, just trying to do everything bigger, louder, stronger, more aggressively, but draws everyone – rich and poor, strong and weak, privileged and disadvantaged – into the orbit of God's love. This is the Kingly Messiah who gives us hope and who offers an example for us to follow.

And here this morning, around the table of communion, we recognise yet again that the will of God was accomplished in the death of Jesus, that for us to have that eternal hope, we walk with him through death. We know that he will lead us through and out the other side into the glorious future that God intended since before the world was made. We follow the King and rejoice!

"FOLLOWING THE KING – 30"
Matthew 12:15-21

The Pharisees start to conspire to get rid of Jesus, finally and definitively. They want to kill him (v14). So Jesus beats a strategic retreat. He does have to die – that's the main reason for his coming into this world – but not yet. God has his plans and the timing is immaculate. Now is not the time for Jesus' sacrifice to take place.

But as he withdraws, the crowds follow him. They are not really concerned about the niceties of the Law nor are they particularly fond of theological disputes. They've seen what Jesus can do. They've experienced some of this new Kingdom action and they want a bit more of it. And Jesus continues to do that for them, but he asks them to try and keep it all hush-hush for a bit. He doesn't really want to antagonise the Pharisees and the authorities any further just at the moment. Nor does he want the people to hail him as the Messiah, because he hasn't really had an opportunity to explain to them what the Messiah is all about. But Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah to show what a huge contrast there is with the usually accepted profile of a King.

Matthew identifies Jesus as God's chosen servant. This servant would have his calling affirmed by being anointed and there is a reminder that this is *"the one I love, in whom I delight"*. (Look back to 3:17.) The Messiah will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Matthew clearly wants his readers to realise that this person is, indeed, the promised Messiah, the one who was to be expected by his people, and who would proclaim to all peoples – *"the nations"* here is the word *ethnoi* which refers mainly to the Gentiles – the justice of God.

But the people had very clear ideas of what they expected their Messiah to be like. Their Messiah would be someone wielding power, leading armies, overthrowing enemies and generally being mighty. But Jesus subverts all that popular expectation. His Kingdom is something so different from what people are used to and from what they want that the King will need to be very different indeed. So Matthew uses the negatives of vv19,20 to stress what this King will not be like. This is a Kingly Messiah who wields unimaginable power in the gentlest way possible.

Matthew reminds us that he will not quarrel. He will not always be crying out and making a noise. He will not be shouting out in the streets. His character, his actions and his policies will speak for themselves. And those actions and policies will mean that the already broken will not be further crushed. Those who are vulnerable will not be trampled on. His appeal will not be simply to the rich and self-satisfied, but more to the poor and the broken, whom he will nurture and encourage. This will be a Kingly Messiah of quiet compassion, who focuses on the weak and the fragile.

In the eyes of the world this Kingly Messiah is a failure. But Matthew's quotation from Isaiah states that *"he leads justice to victory"*. This is about justice – the divine justice of a benevolent Creator rather than the vengeance and retribution of the world's leaders. So this is the one who can truly bring hope.

This is the King we follow. This is a Kingly Messiah who is counter-cultural, who doesn't do things the way everyone expects – with a lot of noise and hullabaloo, with pomp and ceremony, with shouting and shrieking. This is a Kingly Messiah who follows God's way and, in turn, leads his own in the ways that God has set out. He does not engage with the world on its terms, just trying to do everything bigger, louder, stronger, more aggressively, but draws everyone – rich and poor, strong and weak, privileged and disadvantaged – into the orbit of God's love. This is the Kingly Messiah who gives us hope and who offers an example for us to follow.

Questions for discussion

1. Why is Jesus so keen to keep his true identity a secret?
2. The Messiah will *"proclaim the justice of God"*. What is *"the justice of God"*? Can we see it in the world today? If so, how?
3. Why do our ideas of leadership (or kingship) seem so different from the picture painted here?
4. How can Jesus possibly lead justice to victory if he doesn't engage with the world on its terms?
5. How can we follow the example of Jesus' kingship in our daily lives?

