

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 31”
Matthew 12:22-37

Jesus, the quietly compassionate Kingly Messiah, who is increasingly irritating the Pharisees with his re-interpretation of God’s laws and their cherished Scriptures, and with his new vision of life in the Kingdom of God, has tried to move away from their area. He has discovered that they are out to kill him – and it’s not yet the right time for that to happen. He has also had to ask the crowds which have been following him to try and keep quiet about who he is and what he is doing, realising that they haven’t yet really grasped what it means to be the Messiah. For the benefit of his readers, the first Jewish believers in Jesus, Matthew has included a lengthy quotation from the prophet Isaiah in his account, emphasising that Jesus is not the sabre-rattling warrior and liberator that most people are expecting, but a gentle and calm agent of God’s righteous justice who will reach out to all peoples with a powerful hope for the eternal future.

And to this chosen and dearly loved servant of the Lord is brought another case to deal with – a man who has a problem with demonic possession that manifests itself particularly in muteness and blindness. This man is cut off from human relationship by his inability to speak or to see. Matthew doesn’t spend long describing the healing of this man as he has other issues to deal with, but once again it provides the starting point for an opportunity for Jesus to engage with the Pharisees.

As the blind and mute man is restored to wholeness once again, the crowd are “*astonished*” at what they’ve witnessed. It’s the only time Matthew uses this word in his gospel, a word which expresses a real shock at that they’ve seen. And once again they try to link what they’ve just seen with the expectations of the Messiah – after all, the Messiah was going to announce his arrival with, amongst other things, miraculous healings. The only trouble is – particularly in the light of the previous little section – he doesn’t seem to be the expected nationalist leader who will arrive on the scene with all guns blazing. So they ask each other, “*Can this really be the Son of David?*” (“*Son of David*” was another way of referring to the Messiah – although there was also a legend that the real Son of David – Solomon – had been something of a magical healer.)

The Pharisees hear of these rumblings of recognition and start to follow their own agenda. They start to mumble amongst themselves about what’s going on and Matthew picks up on that to describe first of all **The Challenge of the Pharisees** (with Jesus’ own counter-challenge), and then **The Choice which Confronts Us**, before relating some of Jesus’ words about **The Character of the Disciple**. So let’s look at them one by one and see what they have to say to us today, as we seek to follow this Kingly Messiah ourselves.

1. THE CHALLENGE OF THE PHARISEES (v24)

The Pharisees see Jesus dealing with the root cause of this man’s problem by exorcising him, casting out the demon which is causing the trouble. And they pose a question that they’ve posed before (in 9:32-34), but which Jesus ignored on that occasion. Clearly Jesus is doing these exorcisms as a result of some power which he has – the Pharisees cannot deny the evidence of their own eyes. But they cannot bring themselves to admit that it is by the power of God. So in a universe in which the forces of evil are ranged against the One True God there remains for them only one alternative – Jesus must be doing this in the power of Satan – or Beelzebub, as they say here.

It seems that the Pharisees don’t actually say this directly to Jesus, but he picks up on their mutterings and meets the challenge head on. He meets it by offering a challenge of his own which demonstrates the absurdity of their charge. How on earth could he be opposing Satan by using Satan’s power? It just doesn’t make sense. If he is casting out demons and restoring people’s life and well-being to them, what would be the point if he is actually using Satan’s own power? After all, he continues, their people carry out healings and exorcisms: so in whose power are they doing it? There were all kinds of people who

were doing similar things to Jesus at this time – although rather more spectacularly – and many of them found a great deal of sympathy amongst the Pharisees. Josephus describes one such occurrence in his *Antiquities*:

I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demoniacal in the presence of Vespasian, and his sons, and his captains, and the whole multitude of his soldiers. The manner of the cure was this: He put a ring that had a root of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he abjured him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed. And when Eleazar would persuade and demonstrate to the spectators that he had such a power, he set a little way off a cup or basin full of water, and commanded the demon, as he went out of the man, to overturn it, and thereby to let the spectators know that he had left the man. (Antiquities 8:2:5)

So what was behind their activities? asks Jesus. Are they powered by Satan or Beelzebub too?

Clearly, the answer to that question is “No” – and the logical corollary to that is that Jesus is inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God. And, further, if that’s the case, then it’s a sure sign of the Kingdom of God breaking into their world. (Just in passing, Matthew here writes “*Kingdom of God*” rather than his usual “*Kingdom of Heaven*” to parallel with the “*Spirit of God*”.) The arrival of the Messiah, the banishment of evil influences, the restoration of life to the damaged and discarded – they are all signs of the Kingdom of God bursting into the lives of men and women. Jesus had already begun to storm the citadel of Satan, to “*enter the strong man’s house and carry off his possessions*” (v29), as he faced down Satan in the desert, refusing to give in to his temptations.

The challenge of the Pharisees has been countered. They have no answer to his logic nor to the actual experience of seeing him at work and witnessing the radical change he can make to people’s lives. And that is still the case. We are constantly seeing the teaching of Jesus challenged these days by people who refuse to accept that there is any other power at work in our world other than the inexorable powers of evolutionary determinism and individual human autonomy. People like the current bogeyman Richard Dawkins and his like want to argue God out of existence. But there are plenty of people – Alister McGrath being perhaps one of the best-known at present – who can demonstrate the logical and philosophical absurdities of the atheists’ position. And there are even more – those whose intellectual capacity might not be quite that of McGrath and Co. – people like you and me, who can bear witness to the radical and incontrovertible change that has taken place in their own lives. Wherever you look, there are signs that the Kingdom of God is gradually making inroads into the Kingdom of Satan – and the eventual victory has already been assured by the death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s a promise that the Pharisees couldn’t yet see, but which we can claim today.

2. THE CHOICE WHICH CONFRONTS US (v30)

So it comes down to this. The two Kingdoms – the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan – are in opposition. And we all have to make a choice about where we stand on that. Everyone is required to make a decision. As we’ve seen several times recently, neutrality is not an option. You cannot – as Robert Runcie was once famously accused of doing in another context – nail your colours firmly to the fence. Jesus makes it quite clear here: if you’re not for him, you’re against him. If you do not make a conscious decision to stand with him, the default position can only be that you are against him.

[Once again, a brief aside for those of you who know the other gospels pretty well. There are a couple of instances of Jesus saying that if you’re not against him you are for him, which is apparently at odds with this. But those words are spoken in completely different contexts and Jesus is making a completely different point there. You cannot escape the responsibility that every human being has to make up your mind about Jesus and to follow him if you want to get the best out of this life and be assured of a real hope for the eternal future.]

And the enormity of that choice leads into a rather difficult saying of Jesus that we cannot really ignore this morning as it has been a source of great anxiety for many sensitive Christians. Jesus talks about “The Unforgiveable Sin” – the sin against the Holy Spirit. I have lost count of the conversations I’ve had with people who think they might – wittingly or unwittingly – have committed this sin. You can read about it in umpteen books and get umpteen answers to the question of what Jesus is trying to say here – and I don’t intend to confuse you by giving you a selection of them this morning. Let me just offer you my take on it – and then finish with the conclusion that pretty well everyone comes to in the end.

Don’t forget, Jesus is saying this in the context of the exorcism he has just carried out, “*by the Spirit of God*”, the Holy Spirit. It seems obvious to everyone that it’s an action empowered by God, but the Pharisees insist on denying that divine validity. They basically attribute the clear activity of God to the Satan. They refuse to accept what is staring them in the face. So where do they go from there? Jesus is basically saying that they have put themselves in a position from which they cannot now escape. If they are attributing to the Devil what is obviously God’s work, then where on earth can they go for any assurance, any forgiveness? There can be no sense of sin or wrongdoing, no conviction of a need of God’s grace – the whole idea of the Kingdom of God is turned on its head. So what Jesus points out is that, if you “*speak against the Holy Spirit*” by saying that it’s actually the Devil at work, you have not only totally gone against God, but you’ve also cut off for yourself any means of seeking forgiveness – where can you go? Now, there aren’t actually too many people who do that, so it doesn’t really affect too many sincere followers of Jesus who think they might inadvertently have committed this sin. And this is where all the different theories about what Jesus is saying seem to converge: if you’re worried about it, you’re OK. The people who need to be a bit anxious about this – very anxious, actually – are those who are implacably opposed to Jesus’ teaching – so they won’t want his forgiveness anyway.

Once again, it’s back to that clear choice. What are you going to do? Jesus lays before us the two possibilities – for him or against him. And this quietly compassionate Kingly Messiah softly calls us to make up our minds.

3. THE CHARACTER OF THE DISCIPLE (v35)

OK, let’s assume we’ve made that choice. The fact that we’re here this morning means that if we haven’t finally crossed that particular Rubicon, we’re thinking pretty seriously about it. Jesus now contrasts those who are for him with those who are against him – the “*brood of vipers*” that he considers the Pharisees to be. And one of the sure signs of that will be seen in the ***character*** of those who consider themselves to be his followers, his disciples. As we’ve often said before, you can do all kinds of stuff to modify someone’s behaviour and to make them appear to be following a particular way of life, but until the attitudes underneath it all are transformed, it’s basically a waste of time. What are you really like? What’s in your heart? What’s going on under that apparently well-behaved exterior?

Well, one way of finding out is to see what happens when someone is under pressure, when the stresses and strains of life force the underlying character to the surface. In the unguarded moments, when your defences are down and you say the first thing that comes into your head, that’s when the character starts to poke through.

Of course, that’s not a specifically Christian observation. Back in the 3rd century BC, some time before Jesus arrived on the scene, the pagan Greek poet Menander wrote, “*A man’s character can be known from his words*”. And that’s the thought Jesus elaborates on here. He talks about “*careless words*”, the words that are spoken in the heat of the moment and which really betray what’s going on down inside. That word “*careless*” in Greek is a word that is made up from a couple of words that mean, effectively, “does no work”. It means “*useless*”. For the keen shopper at high street catalogue stores, the word is actually “*argos*”! In the general letters towards the end of the New Testament, the leader of the church in

Jerusalem, Jesus' brother James, writes about the difficulties of guarding our tongues and of the damage we can do with a few careless words. It's a universal human problem.

And the reason it is such a problem is precisely because it betrays our attitudes. I'm probably one of the worst at this – and I say that because a lot of you are thinking it anyway – but the way we speak, the things we say to each other, the words we allow to escape when we're not thinking (I was going to say "ill-chosen words", but the point is we don't choose them – they burst out), it all shows up our true nature: cynicism, sarcasm, arrogance, bigotry, coarseness and so on. The only way to overcome it is with the help of the King we claim to follow, Jesus Christ. We need to cultivate that Kingdom worldview, an attitude shaped and moulded by our relationship with Jesus. Back once again to *Romans 12:2* – "*Don't let the world around squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds [transform your attitudes] from within*" (J B Phillips). And that only comes through continued time with God – in prayer, in Bible reading, in reflection and meditation. Otherwise it is shaped by what you read, what you watch on television or DVD, what you study, where your interests lie, what you listen to. If you spend all your time listening to foul-mouthed stand-up comedy, that will start to affect your attitudes. If you spend all your time watching sexually suggestive music videos or gratuitously violent DVDs, that will start to affect your attitudes. If you spend all your time reading the rabidly consumerist life-style magazines and the barely articulate ramblings of the newspaper gossip columnists, that will start to affect your attitudes. Then that will be reflected in your values, your conversations, your vocabulary.

Look back to what we read last week about this quietly compassionate Kingly Messiah (*12:19*) who will not be forever shouting out in the streets and picking quarrels with those who don't agree with him. There's no need to be shouting out all the time – especially if what comes out is unhelpful and unrighteous. Your gentle speech and your Christ-like behaviour should make it obvious that you are a follower of the King. Be careful, because one day – Judgment Day, in fact (*v36*) – you will "*have to give account for every rubbish word you've spoken*".

So, Matthew is saying through the way he relates these words of Jesus, look at who Jesus is. Consider the reasonable arguments for following him and see how he transforms the lives of men and women. Think about it, then make up your mind. You've got to make a choice – and even ignoring him is a choice. Once you have made that choice – hopefully the choice to follow him – allow that to affect all you do and allow the values, attitudes and worldview of Jesus to affect all you do, so that it's obvious to others, even when your guard is down, even when you're under pressure that you are a follower of the King.

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Jesus offers a challenge of his own which demonstrates the absurdity of their charge. How on earth could he be opposing Satan by using Satan's power? After all, he continues, their people carry out healings and exorcisms: so in whose power are they doing it? Are they powered by Satan too?

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you consider to be signs of the Kingdom of God breaking into our world? How can we cultivate those signs in our own personal lives and in the life of the church?
2. How can we "*tie up the strong man*" (v29) ?
3. Is it really impossible to be neutral about Jesus? If not, how can we convey the urgency of the choice to those around us?
4. What is your view of "The Unforgiveable Sin"? Does it ever worry you?
5. What does Jesus mean by "*every careless word*" (v36)? Should we not tell jokes or be frivolous?
6. How can we cultivate an attitude shaped by Jesus?