

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 72”

Matthew 22:41-46

My brother was doing some open-air evangelism in France a while back and, as is so often the case, it was proving to be hard going. They had a small band and a couple of preachers, but no-one was really taking much notice. Then someone actually complained about them and before long a couple of vans of CRS turned up. The CRS are the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité, the elite riot police in France, and if they arrive, you know there's going to be trouble. So quite a crowd gathered to watch the anticipated bloodshed. After a few questions the police decided that everything was OK and just stood and watched. But there was now a pretty sizeable crowd and the rest of the open-air presentation went much more successfully.

Jesus makes use of an opportunity a bit like that in the passage we've just read. The Pharisees and other leaders of the people have been questioning Jesus in the Temple courtyard and that has drawn a crowd. But now they've finished, Jesus decides he'll use the opportunity to put a question of his own to them. *“While the Pharisees were gathered together”* Jesus asks them a fundamental question. *“What do you think about the Christ – the Messiah?”* he says.

This question is very important given all that he has been teaching over the past three years. As we've seen time and time again, Jesus has been talking about the Kingdom of God. In many of his parables he's been trying to give a flavour of what this Kingdom will be like. He has been showing by his own actions that the Kingdom is all about hope and healing, about dignity and fulfilment – this sovereign rule of God that will eventually be established over all things is a restoration of what God originally intended for his creation. The Jewish people had read about it in their Scriptures, in our Old Testament. The prophets and preachers and poets whom God used to speak to his people had been proclaiming that for centuries. And they had also said that this Kingdom would be inaugurated by a Messiah figure: someone would appear and usher in this new era.

And throughout his Gospel, Matthew has been showing the Jesus is this Messiah. He has quoted from the Old Testament many, many times and has consciously drawn parallels between Jesus' life and teaching and what was prophesied in those Scriptures. There have been occasions when the people have hailed Jesus as Messiah, most recently at the beginning of this last week of Jesus' life – just a couple of days before, in fact – as Jesus rode through the Passover crowds into Jerusalem on a donkey. As he made his way into the city they were shouting out, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”*

But Jesus' question has a kind of follow-up to it. Not only does he ask the group of Pharisees what they think about the Messiah, but he then asks, "*Whose son is he?*" That may seem a rather odd question to be asking them, but it's quite crucial, really, as we shall see. He doesn't simply want to know what they think – he is creating an opportunity to say a bit more (albeit rather enigmatically) about who he is.

The Pharisees reply without hesitation, it seems. "*The son of David*" is what they have traditionally considered the coming Messiah to be. As we've remarked before, the Passover time was when people were most expectant about the arrival of the Messiah. It was a time of nationalistic fervour and religious anticipation. They were looking out for a Messiah at this time – and there was no shortage of people claiming to be the Messiah. In their thinking, though, the Messiah was going to be a descendant of David, Israel's greatest ever King, and he would rise up and drive out of Israel the oppressors, the hated Romans, liberating the Jews and restoring the earthly Kingdom to the Jews. Their idea of a Messiah had gradually morphed over the centuries into a human, political figure – yes, anointed by God (that's what "Messiah" means in Hebrew – and what "Christ" means in Greek), but still a human who would establish the Kingdom by military might.

As we know, Jesus has always shied away from such expectations of him. The very act of riding into the city on a donkey was to try and subvert that expectation. He wasn't about to fulfil their desire for another military and political ruler who would still be at the mercy of world events, of bigger armies, of bolder empires. Hence the second part of the question. "OK," says Jesus, "Explain this, then." And he refers to *Psalms 110*, quoting the first verse of that song. It's one of the Psalms that was always interpreted messianically – it's full of allusions and prophecies about this coming figure.

King David wrote the Psalm himself – no-one ever doubted that – and talks about the Lord speaking to his Lord. Just one quick word of explanation about the language here. The two words "Lord" here are the same in English and were the same in Greek as Jesus spoke them ("*κυριος*"). But in the Hebrew in which the Psalm was originally written, the words are different. If you look back at this verse you'll notice that the first "Lord" is written in capital letters – it's something that you'll see throughout the Old Testament. When "Lord" is written in capital letters it refers to the name of God – the four Hebrew letters known as the "tetragrammaton" – which can be transliterated as "Yahweh" (or in older versions "Jehovah"). For the Jews the name of God was too holy to be spoken or written down so they never actually wrote or spoke the name, but used the word represented by "LORD". (We have a friend in London, a Messianic Jew, who never writes the word "God", but puts "G – D".) The second "Lord" is the word used for a lord, for a superior.

So David is saying, “God said to my Lord” – “my Lord” being the Messiah, as becomes obvious throughout the rest of the Psalm. Jesus’ point is that David would never call his son “Lord” – it just wasn’t done for anyone to refer to their son in that way. Therefore, the Messiah cannot be the human descendant of David. The Messiah will not be a purely human figure who will go on to conquer nations and subdue oppressors and, effectively, set up an alternative worldly empire. The Messiah is not simply going to be a special human being anointed with oil in the traditional way. The Pharisees, and all the other expectant people, are mistaken if they are looking for just another political leader. This isn’t what it’s all about.

One Pharisee, though – who may possibly even have been part of the group on this occasion – did eventually get it right. Saul, Paul, the “*Pharisee of the Pharisees*” as he once styled himself, finally saw the light and at the beginning of his magnificent *Letter to the Romans* puts it like this:

*“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who **through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power** by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

David and the Hebrew prophets looked forward to Yeshua, the Messiah. Paul, in those words, looks back to Jesus, the Christ. And where those Hebrew and Greek ideas meet, there stands Jesus, making it clear through his words and his actions, through his life and death and resurrection and glorification that he is the one they’ve been waiting for. For those who are prepared to listen and to take seriously his teaching and his call, he is saying that he is the long-awaited Messiah. Remember, that’s what Matthew’s trying to get into the heads of his first readers, those new Jewish Christians who were wondering if following Jesus was a betrayal of their long-held Jewish faith and culture. Once again Matthew telling them that it’s OK – this is what it’s all been leading up to.

He is not going to restore the Kingdom to Israel. The disciples themselves are still making that mistake as Jesus prepares to leave them and return to heaven (*Acts 1:6 “they gathered round him and asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’”*). He has come to inaugurate this new Kingdom for all people, this Kingdom of God which will restore everything to the way God intended it to be before sin and evil got in and perverted and polluted it all. Jesus is not just another human being – however special he might be.

You see, we cannot – we must not – look on Jesus in that way. We cannot regard him as simply a great teacher – he is, but he’s far more than that. We cannot regard him as simply a good man – he is, but he’s

far more than that. We cannot regard him as simply a magnificent example – he is, but he’s far more than that. We cannot regard him as simply a powerful inspiration – he is, but he’s far more than that. We cannot rule out the supernatural and the divine. We have to see him as our Saviour, our Lord, our Kingly Messiah.

As we keep pointing out, this is the last week before Jesus’ execution. The Pharisees – indeed, all the people – have had three years to watch him. They have heard his teaching. They have listened to his parables. They have seen his healings and exorcisms and miracles. They have experienced his power and his kindness. After they have seen and heard so much, it’s quite understandable that Jesus should ask them, “So what do you think of the Messiah, then?” They have to make their minds up as to who he really is. In a couple of days’ time they will make it emphatically clear what they think as they call for him to be nailed to a cross.

All of you here this morning have, I imagine, read and heard so much about Jesus. You may even have experienced stuff in your own life that can be put down to the activity of his Holy Spirit. Most of you have decided that, yes, he is the Messiah, he is worth following. But the question comes to all of us afresh today – “*What do you think about the Christ?*” What’s your view of all this? Do you, like the people, think that Jesus is just another man – a teacher, a revolutionary, a nice example for us to follow? Do you, like most of the Pharisees, think that Jesus is really just a trouble-maker – a poor, deluded rabble-rouser who doesn’t really have anything much to say? Or do you, like Saul the Pharisee, Paul the Apostle, think that Jesus is the Son of God, the Kingly Messiah, the one who has come to help you get back to God? You have to make up your mind at some point – and once you’ve made up your mind, that will affect the way you live, it will influence every part of your life. It will mean liberation and fulfilment. It will mean sacrifice and commitment. It will mean a powerful hope and a purpose in life. It will mean enjoying God’s grace and joy and satisfaction for ever – starting now! Don’t put off answering the question – you don’t know how long you have to make up your mind.

"FOLLOWING THE KING – 72"
Matthew 22:41-46

After the questions of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus decides he'll use the opportunity to put a question of his own to them. *"What do you think about the Christ – the Messiah?"* he says.

This question is very important given all that he has been teaching over the past three years. Jesus has been talking about the Kingdom of God. The Jewish people had read about it in their Scriptures, in our Old Testament. The prophets and preachers and poets whom God used to speak to his people had been proclaiming that for centuries. And they had also said that this Kingdom would be inaugurated by a Messiah figure: someone would appear and usher in this new era. There have been occasions when the people have hailed Jesus as Messiah, most recently as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. As he made his way into the city they were shouting out, *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

But Jesus' question has a kind of follow-up to it. Not only does he ask the group of Pharisees what they think about the Messiah, but he then asks, *"Whose son is he?"* *"The son of David"* is what they have traditionally considered the coming Messiah to be. But their idea of a Messiah was of a human, political figure – yes, anointed by God (that's what "Messiah" means in Hebrew – and what "Christ" means in Greek), but still a human who would establish the Kingdom by military might.

Jesus refers to *Psalms 110*, quoting the first verse of that song. It's one of the Psalms that was always interpreted messianically – it's full of allusions and prophecies about this coming figure. David is saying, "God said to my Lord" – "my Lord" being the Messiah, as becomes obvious throughout the rest of the Psalm. Jesus' point is that David would never call his son "Lord" – it just wasn't done for anyone to refer to their son in that way. Therefore, the Messiah cannot be the human descendant of David. The Messiah will not be a purely human figure who will go on to conquer nations and subdue oppressors and, effectively, set up an alternative worldly empire.

Look at what Paul writes in *Romans 1:1-4*. David and the Hebrew prophets looked forward to Yeshua, the Messiah. Paul, in those words, looks back to Jesus, the Christ. And where those Hebrew and Greek ideas meet, there stands Jesus, making it clear through his words and his actions, through his life and death and resurrection and glorification that he is the one they've been waiting for.

We cannot regard Jesus as simply a great teacher – he is, but he's far more than that. We cannot regard him as simply a good man – he is, but he's far more than that. We cannot regard him as simply a magnificent example – he is, but he's far more than that. We cannot regard him as simply a powerful inspiration – he is, but he's far more than that. We cannot rule out the supernatural and the divine. We have to see him as our Saviour, our Lord, our Kingly Messiah.

The Pharisees – indeed, all the people – have had three years to watch him. They have heard his teaching. They have listened to his parables. They have seen his healings and exorcisms and miracles. They have experienced his power and his kindness. After they have seen and heard so much, it's quite understandable that Jesus should ask them, "So what do you think of the Messiah, then?"

Questions for discussion

1. What do you think about the Messiah?
2. Why are people reluctant to see Jesus as anything other than a human being?
3. What difference does it make that Jesus is the Son of God?
4. Why is it important for you personally that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ?

