



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, October 23, 2011
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock
on
Saint Matthew 22:34-46
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A SERMON FOR THE ADMISSION OF CHORISTERS

In this week's gospel, the series of controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders continue. They began in last week's gospel with the Pharisees and the Herodians asking whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. The Sadducees follow with a dispute about the resurrection of the dead. Today's gospel contains an exchange with a lawyer who asks our Lord which is the greatest commandment. Jesus answers him and follows up with a question of his own about the Messiah. The issues in question throughout these exchanges are the sovereignty of God; the resurrection of the dead; God's will for his people; and the Messiah. Jesus and his opponents are not just sparring but are struggling over the core issues of the faith.

These men who are picking and probing Jesus, in order to trap him in some doctrinal error are the religious leaders and teachers. In their exchanges with Jesus these men are amazed at his answers, and are baffled by his own questions to them about their own tradition; the tradition they were responsible for teaching to the people.

Have you ever answered a question in the affirmative by saying, "Is the pope catholic?" Imagine asking the pope if he is catholic and him saying he would have to think about it. If the pope doesn't know if he is catholic or not then how is anyone else supposed to know? And, if he doesn't know, how is he supposed to teach anyone else what it means to be catholic?

That is what we have here: the scribes, the Pharisees, the lawyers, the Sadducees, these are the priests and catechists of their day. They are the stewards of the Jewish tradition, the teachers of the people, and they are called out and shown to be ignorant of their own scriptures, their own tradition and that tradition's hopes. If they don't understand the sovereignty of God, if they don't understand the resurrection, if they don't understand the law and can't recognize the Messiah, then who can hope to, and how can they teach others? In their confrontations, Jesus' opponents are shown to be wanting. When confronted with the embodiment of their tradition and its hopes, they don't even recognize the Christ when he stands before them. This is shameful and they are publicly shamed.

And so, they seek to put that shame as far away from them as they can. The only answer they have to Jesus' questions about God, law, and Messiah is to have him arrested and executed.

One key to understanding how Jesus responds to their final argument is to be found in his own question about the Messiah. How can David's son be David's Lord? David was a hero, a national leader and he built a powerful kingdom here on earth. He defeated the enemies that threatened his nation and his rule. His enemies were made a footstool for his feet. All of this was in fulfillment of a promise that God made to David. I will establish your line forever and your kingdom will never end.

But it did end. David died. In time, his kingdom divided. The northern part, wiped off the face of the earth, the southern part, conquered and taken into captivity. These events present the Israelites with a profound theological dilemma. God promised a kingship and a kingdom that would never end. Now there is no king, there is no kingdom. How is God going to fulfill his promise to David and to the nation?

Obviously, you need a new heir and a new kingdom. But if that heir is a man, and if that kingdom is a national endeavor just like the first one, and if the enemies are the same national enemies, maybe with new names, then how is this new king any greater than David? How can David call him his Lord as he does in Psalm 110?

He can do that if his heir is not just the son of David, a common messianic title, but if he is the Son of God. And he can call his heir Lord if the kingdom he establishes is more than an earthly kingdom, perhaps the Kingdom of Heaven come near to us. And David can call his heir Lord if his enemies are more than national foes, but if he conquers the common foes of all mankind: sin and death. Make those enemies a footstool, and then you have more than a messiah that will reestablish the glory of Israel and overthrow Rome; you have the son of God redeeming all the nations and overthrowing the curse of Adam.

Why couldn't the Sadducees see that in Jesus? They stopped believing in the resurrection. Why couldn't the Pharisees see it? They had not learned how to love God with all their being. Why couldn't the scribes and lawyers see who Jesus is? They could not figure out how to love their neighbor.

Yet, these were the ones in charge of teaching these lessons to the people. And Jesus saw these people and had compassion on them because they were harassed like sheep without a shepherd. He came as a teacher meek and lowly in heart but with an authority unlike any other man. The hirelings are stymied, and they can't abide the lesson.

Jesus knows that God's hand touches all things and he is Lord of the Temple, Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of men's hearts; he alone is sovereign. Jesus fulfills the greatest commandment by loving God with all his body, mind and strength; we see this in the crucifixion. Though he was innocent, he died for all of our sins and shows us what it is to love neighbor as self. He gives everything he has to God and he gives everything he has to us in love on the cross.

A former president was once asked why he didn't work harder to destroy his enemies. He replied that he did destroy them by making them his friends. When Jesus embraces the cross, he unites us to himself in his sacrifice; we are cleansed from our sins by his blood poured out. We, who were numbered as enemies of Christ through our sinfulness, are loved as neighbors, and are saved. Jesus made us more than friends or neighbors; he made us

brothers and sisters. He gave us power to become God's children. We have been made heirs with Christ to his eternal kingdom.

Today's gospel ends with this: "And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions." Maybe. I wonder if Jesus' execution wasn't the last question, the last test the priests and teachers presented to Jesus. What more can you say to us Jesus now that we have killed you? In death, they think they have finally found a way to trap Jesus and silence him. But the Christ has one more word to speak to them, and to us: Resurrection. In that answer to their ultimate charge, Jesus shows himself to be more than a good teacher, but the King whose kingdom will have no end.