

## The Emperor of Love

*Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command... (Collect)*



*"Make us love what you command..."* Today's collect is an ancient prayer, dating back to the time of emperors and kings, when loving what one's lord commanded made sense. Though the language may sound a bit strange to our democratic ears, I find it helpful for summing up, or collecting, the two seemingly different messages in today's Gospel. Let's look at each in turn, then see how together they offer us good news for today.

The first part of the Gospel rounds out a grilling Jesus was facing from the Sadducees and Pharisees. He was being grilled because he had been making trouble. Jesus had paraded into Jerusalem and put the whole city in turmoil. He's turned over the tables of those making a profit from temple religious observance. Using parables, he's attacked the collected religious elite of Israel. The crowds are eating it up. Even the children are crying out *"Hosanna to the Son of David."* (Matthew 21:15)

The chief priests and elders, angry and threatened, are questioning Jesus' authority, trying to entrap him. The Pharisees put up one of their best theological minds to test him: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus' answer is flawless. Love God. Love your neighbor. The Torah, all prophetic teachings, all religion hang on these two commandments. It seems Jesus and those hoping to trap him are in agreement!

In 1st century Palestine and 21st century America, there is no more compelling teaching than love of God and neighbor. If this were all Christianity was about, I suppose we could stop today's gospel reading right there.

But then, Jesus turns over one more table. He asks his questioners a question: *"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"* (Matthew 22:42a) I admit, the discussion got a little obscure for me at this point. This second part of today's Gospel seems like an argument not too far removed from asking how many angels sit on the head of pin. And of course, as a Christian, the answer is automatic: Jesus Christ is God's son! But for his questioners, Jesus had raised a profound conundrum.

The Jews believed that the Messiah would be literally descended from David, the archetype of Israelite kingship. The Anointed One would restore the kingdom of Israel, ushering in a new era of peace as all nations come to be united under Israel and in praise of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The people were wondering if Jesus, who was well known to be of David's lineage, was in fact the promised Messiah. This was what the entrenched leadership feared.

But Jesus doesn't actually go there. Instead, he goes farther. He quotes Psalm 110, a song about the promised Messiah that the Jews understood to be authored by David himself. In the first verse, David says *"The LORD said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under my feet'"* (Psalm 110:1, Matthew 22:44). That is, "The LORD

(Yahweh) said to my lord (adonai)...” Now, no Jewish parent would ever address their progeny by the honorific term adonai. It simply was not done. Yet there it was in black and white. David calling the Messiah, his own descendant, his “lord.”

The entrappers were trapped. It would be bad enough if Jesus, this son of David, were the Messiah. But what if he was also greater than David? What if even King David was his subject? What if the Son of Man was also the Son of God?

For the Jews of first century Palestine, this was inconceivable. A divine Messiah proclaiming that love trumps everything, including notions of worldly kingship. The Pharisees were left speechless. Which is kind of fitting, given the unspoken name for God: “Yahweh,” the mystery pointing to the great “I AM.”)

All earthly notions of religion, government, laws and doctrines, all hang on love of God and neighbor, not just as a teaching, but as *lived out* by a very human son of God who died in love on the cross. Moses, the giver of the Law, Israel’s greatest prophet who beheld the face of God, died looking upon the Promised Land. Jesus, love crucified and risen from the dead, *is* the Promised Land. This is the full meaning of today’s scripture.

As a Christian I have pledged to pick up my cross and follow the divine Messiah of today’s Gospel. Yet, in a sad, angry season of political ill will, I have at times found myself caught up more in anger at my neighbor rather than love for him. I imagine I’m not alone. Right here, in lovely Bridgewater, the two town political committees are pleading with people to stop vandalizing each other’s election signs. In the news media, we hear about those who have taken up sword and shield to fight for their version of an earthly promised land, forgetting that the true Promised Land died on a cross so that we might become a kingdom ruled by love.

Even prideful, egotistical Napoleon, defeated and finally exiled on remote St. Helena, seemed to gather up more truthful humility than the political opponents of our day sometimes muster: “*Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself founded empires,*” he said, “*but upon what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love.*”

There it is, straight from Napoleon’s lips. A summary of today’s Gospel: Jesus Christ, the Emperor of Love. Word made flesh. In love. For love. For us. And for us to follow.

Please, pray with me:

Jesus, Emperor of Love, we are your humble subjects. We so want to abide in your love. We yearn to become a peaceful, beloved community. With faith, hope and charity, make us love what you command. Give us the grace to love God above all else. To love our neighbor as ourself. To treat each other with the respect and dignity befitting children made in our Creator’s image. With your Spirit giving us voice and filling our hearts with your love, we pray. Amen.