

“And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, at the Low Mass on Wednesday 11 October 2023 (The Wednesday after the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity), by Mr James Kenyon, Chapel Intern, Pusey House

“And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.” ST. MATTHEW 22.46

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. +

OUR passage from Matthew’s Gospel this evening (Chapter 22.34-end) plunges us neck-deep into the events of Holy Week, at the very end of Jesus’ various disputations with the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders in the Temple. And by this stage in Our Lord’s ministry, he was on a head-on collision course with said leaders, which as we know, would ultimately culminate in his crucifixion for the sins of the world.

As ever, we would do well to note why Jesus was murdered:

- He was not murdered for his social teaching - that we should love our neighbours and do good to all men - though this certainly pricked the guilty consciences of the Pharisees who, for all their legal scrupulosity, had utterly failed to fulfil these central tenets of the Torah.
- Nor was it for politics and - contrary to popular modern myth - his supposedly revolutionary socioeconomic stance, though his teaching was certainly revolutionary in a different sense, and the Jews of his day did indeed attempt to tie contemporary political instabilities into their persecution of Jesus, by falsely portraying him as a rebel against Roman authority.
- But most surprisingly of all, it was not even for claiming to be the Messiah. That might sound shocking to some of us, but it is important to note that claiming to be the Messiah has never in and of itself been a crime under Jewish Law, let alone one punishable by death. This was noted as a point of curiosity by the political commentator Ben Shapiro, an Orthodox Jew, in a discussion with Bishop Robert Barron: and it’s a very good point, because it raises the critical question of why, in fact, the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day wanted him dead.

As the Church has always known, Jesus was killed not because he was a messianic Claimant, but because of what he claimed messiah to be: That is, because he claimed the Messiah – himself - was divine.

The exchange we read in this passage is in fact the last communication Jesus holds with the religious leaders before his trial. When Matthew writes that “no man from that day forth dared ask him any more questions” (verse 45), he literally meant that was it, until they put him on trial.

So why do the Pharisees answer “Son of David” and not say, Son of God, Son of Man, Saviour, or any number of other titles we are more accustomed to bestowing upon Jesus as Christians? Well, it fundamentally comes down to the fact that they were earthly-minded: they were looking to the coming Messiah not as a spiritual, but as an earthly liberator, and so had completely missed the forest for the trees, as it were. They were so focussed on the prophecies of Israel’s deliverance from enemy nations that they neglected all that scripture had to say about the Messiah bringing all the nations together under the one true God (Isaiah and the Psalms are especially replete with such passages).

Now having said that it must also be said that it’s easy for us as Christians with hindsight to look back on that and judge them, but, in fairness, their circumstances as an oppressed people looking for a liberator must be borne in mind. Hence the answer “Son of David” -their go-to appellation for the role and work of Messiah - points to Messiah’s earthly lineage, and therefore to the legitimacy of his inheritance as earthly king of Israel.

But you will note that Jesus very rarely uses this title of himself, - in fact I’m yet to confirm this, but I have a feeling he may never actually do so (feel free to correct me after Mass if you’re aware of anything to the contrary). He certainly never rejects it and indeed the Gospels - especially Matthew in light of his apparent Jewish audience - devote a great deal of energy to establishing the importance of his genealogy, as anyone who has taken the time to pore over Matthew 1 can confirm.

Nevertheless, as a title, “Son of David” is always ascribed to him by third parties, (e.g. Matthew 15:22/the Syrophoenician woman; or the two blind men in Matthew 20:30) and of course, inadvertently, the Pharisees themselves. But in in Jesus’ own self-conception as Messiah, it could be seen as having a somewhat secondary place, precisely because he did not come to be the earthly rescuer they hoped for, but a spiritual saviour, to save them - and all the world at that - from Sin and death and Hell, not just the Jews, and not just from Imperium.

Thus, his goal in asking this question is to disabuse them of their image of the Messiah as a great military leader. And indeed, nowhere in Scripture does it state that the Messiah is to be a great military leader. Militaristic language is used in the prophets, but it is never stated with anywhere near the level of explicitness that 1st-century Jews seemed to think, that Messiah would be a conquering king to lead them against their enemies in this world. And indeed the prophets frequently say the opposite - as we all well know from the Passion Week liturgies - depicting the Messiah as the suffering servant (e.g. Isaiah 53).

So, by asking this question Jesus, to quote a certain apologetics resource, “exposed the Jewish leaders’ ineptitude as teachers and their ignorance of what the Old Testament taught as to the true nature of the Messiah, further alienating them from Him.”

Our Lord’s question, then, is very much a rhetorical one. But, it stops there: Jesus doesn’t actually give them the answer as he so often does elsewhere. Rather, he leaves it open-ended, as an invitation of sorts. But, as with all of scripture, we must read it as an invitation to ourselves, as well as Jesus’ contemporary hearers: Let us never lose sight of who Jesus really is; let us not miss the forest for the trees.