

The Divine Son, the Son of David, and the Double Law of Love

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday 8 October 2023 (The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity), by Father George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House

Then one of them, who was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and [...] Jesus asked them, saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? ST. MATTHEW 22.34-END

THE Gospel begins with Jesus being put on the spot, tempted, we are told. Master, which is the great commandment in the law? But what is the temptation in this question?

In our Lord's day, some of the religious experts taught that all the commandments of God were equally important – 'Let a light commandment be as dear to you as a heavy commandment'.¹ If our Lord rejects this position and suggests a hierarchy of importance, He will appear to be a false teacher. Our Lord will indeed suggest a hierarchy, but a hierarchy that He finds in the law, and which He presents as the fulfilment of the law. He puts together passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus in a way that shows where the law is destined.² Not one great commandment, God is not a monad, God is a single community of overflowing love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This love overflows, God is not alone outside of God either, God the Holy Trinity so loved the world that the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, becomes part of the created order, He comes into the world which He sustains by the word of His power. It is said that for all his love of the 'working class', Karl Marx could barely stand individual workers.³ We can love an abstraction fairly easily; loving flesh and blood people with all their gifts and faults is harder.

Loving God includes loving what God loves, people in need of healing and forgiveness. St Augustine puts before us the stereoscopic and dual engine character of love succinctly and wonderfully in his description of the virtues:

“Temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right

¹ Bruner, reference below, p 419 top, citing Bonnard, 327.

² Deuteronomy 6.4-5 and Leviticus 19.18

³ Isaiah Berlin in F. D. Bruner, *Matthew A commentary, Vol 2: The Churchbook Matthew 13-28*, p 415

distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it. Love, then, out of a pure heart, and a good conscience and faith unfeigned, is the great and true virtue, because it is, ‘the end of the commandment’”.⁴

Love is not just will, not just action, love is also knowledge. Fulfilling the commandments is a matter of intellect and will, of knowledge and love. Love is ordered toward the end which is God and God loved in human creaturely form also.

It may be helpful to recall that this is a third temptation, the third question in Matthew chapter 23 which puts our Lord to the test. First, ‘Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?’ ‘Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's’, render unto God above all the human person, human coin, stamped with the image of God.

Then, the second temptation, which was - to paraphrase - Is there truly a resurrection of the dead?⁵ ‘Jesus answered and said unto them [...] the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [...] is not the God of the dead, but of the living’. ‘Master, which is the great commandment in the law?’

These three temptations mirror in some way the temptations of our Lord by the devil at the very beginning of his ministry. These temptations come at the end of His earthly ministry - We meet our Lord this morning at the beginning of Holy Week, and He is very much on trial already. But, it is not only Christ on trial, He remains God, Lord over all, and the ones on trial are the very ones who tempt Him. That means, of course, we are included. He puts the lawyer himself on trial, and He puts us on trial: - Jesus asked them, Jesus asks us, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? All the questions, and all the temptations resolve into this one – who is Jesus? Do we recognize and trust the teacher from Nazareth to be the Son of God and Lord of all, come to us in human form?

Once again, we are being questioned, we are being challenged. We are being invited to adore God, and to cherish God’s people. Or to put it another way, we are being invited, challenged, to perceive and adore the divine in human people and in human words. Or,

⁴ Ep 167.11, to Jerome, AD 415

⁵ Matt 22.28 ‘Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her.’

finally, we could say that we are being invited to know and to love the Lord Jesus Christ, God of God, begotten not made, and truly man, a real and complete human being. And, if that were not enough, in this temptation, we do not encounter the devil unmasked, as it were, as in the temptations in the wilderness. Instead, we are being shown the importance not only of recognizing how the divine can be clothed with human flesh and human letters, but how the evil spirit can take on human words and actions also.

You could say that a lot is being asked of us, a lot for the first Sunday of term, and a lot for the Christian life, any Sunday – yes, indeed, we are being challenged and tested, but these questions come not at the beginning, but at the end, after a long period of training. We have been training and preparing all summer, since we set out on our Trinity pilgrimage way back in the 7th week of Trinity Term. How have we grown in wisdom and stature these past 18 weeks of the long green season of Trinitytide? Do you remember the way in which love pursued and questioned us in the first weeks of Trinity season: ‘BELOVED, let us love one another: for love is of God, and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. [...] If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar’. It seemed overwhelming, impossible even.

Yes, after these 18 weeks of Christ feeding us, leading us, growing in us, St Paul addresses us with confidence: ‘I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you’.

This has been the journey and pilgrimage of Trinity season. God’s grace does not go out in vain. Isaiah saw this: ‘So shall my word, [MY SON] be that goeth forth out of my mouth: [HE] shall not return unto me void, but [HE] shall accomplish that which I please.’ (Isaiah 55.11)

If we have been walking this path, hearing and receiving God’s word, receiving and responding to his grace, we have been enriched by Him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge, Christ is being formed in us.

And at the same time, we began our worship today as we do each week – “Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these laws in

our hearts” – the work is incomplete, we are still on the journey, and we turn to God in prayer, in confidence and in hope: Kyrie Eleison, Lord make us whole, shine the light of Thy countenance upon us. In these last weeks of Trinity season, we are being stretched, invited to enter into the inheritance which has been put before us and shaped in us these past weeks.

In order to preserve you from an overabundance of sermons, I am going to pass over the first portion of the Gospel, the part we pray every week. We are coming to know that God leaves ‘no part of our life which may justly be unfilled by Him.’⁶ Perhaps we are coming to see that this is not a threat but a promise – we become more ourselves as we are more filled with God. However imperfectly, or however fully, we have already said yes this morning to this part of the Gospel.

But what does it continue, why do we have this extra bit added on? I’ve said enough already for you to know that it is not really an add-on. The question the Lord asks is a key which unlocks our understanding of the great commandments and the key which opens the treasure which makes the fulfilling of them possible. All the temptations and trials resolve into this one, ‘Who do men say that I am’, or ‘What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?’

Let’s pause to have a close look at the question so that we can understand, receive, and love the response.

What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David. He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, the Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy foot-stool?

Here, Christ points us to Psalm 110, a psalm which we read at least once per month at Morning Prayer on the 23rd day of the month. ‘David in spirit’ gives us this psalm, we have here the words of a man, King David, and the Words of God the Holy Spirit.

David says, The LORD, Jehovah in the Hebrew, said to my Lord, that is to David’s Lord, Adonai: Sit thou at my right hand [...] David describes the speech of the Lord God of hosts speaking to another who David himself also calls Lord.

⁶ *Catena Aurea* on Matthew, p 762, Aug. de Doctr. Christ. i.22

How can the one who David calls Lord be also David's son? Who is the 'Lord' of the king, of God's anointed?

It was not only the lawyers and Pharisees who expected that the Messiah would be the Son of David. According to the promises of the scriptures, in particular the prophecy of Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 7.12ff, all the people believed that the Messiah would be the son of David.

Our Lord does not suggest that they are wrong. The Messiah is the son of David, or in the words of St Paul, He 'was made of the seed of David according to the flesh'.⁷ But that is only part of the picture, the son of David is indeed David's Lord.

The religious experts of the day could not see that the Messiah was both David's son, but that He was also something more, who we confess to be God of God. In the words of St Augustine:

'How can we answer unless we learn from you? But now that we have learned, we give him our response: in the beginning you were the Word, and as the Word you were with God, and you, the Word, were God. All things were made through you, and in this we know you to be David's Lord. But because of our weakness, because we lay prostrate, hopeless flesh, you, the Word, were made flesh in order to dwell among us, in this we know you to be David's son'.⁸

The psalm itself suggests the divinity of the Messiah. The Lord to whom the Lord God speaks is invited to sit at the right hand of God. This second person shares in the glory of the one God. And, David hears the Lord God speaking to the Lord Messiah even before the Messiah comes – the Messiah pre-exists His coming. As we know and confess, the Son was with the Father before all worlds.

This exposition of the psalm is not an add-on. It is the question which give the answer to the three questions our Lord is asked. The religious experts put Him on trial, he puts them on trial – they do not know that the one to whom they are speaking is the Messiah, the Son of David, and the Lord God of one substance with the Father.

⁷ Rom 1.3: Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh;

⁸ Exposition of Psalm 109, *Saint Augustine: Expositions of the Psalms*, p. 266 Vol 5, Maria Boulding Trans., New City Press, Bruner, p. 426-7 quotes another passage from Augustine.

The exposition which our Lord offers here is a key in two other ways also. The Pharisees could not see that the Messiah could be both the son of David and the Lord of David. They did not understand, they could not understand, the principle of the Incarnation. God the son joins to Himself human nature. To know and to love God means that we know and love the God who becomes incarnate. The double commandment to love God and to love our neighbour expresses this principle of the Incarnation: BOTH 'If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar'. AND 'Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God' 1 John 4.2.

We are being invited to adore God, and to cherish the people made in the image of God. Or, to put it another way, we are being put on trial: are we willing, are we able, to perceive and adore the divine in human people and in human words?

We are also invited to see how the evil spirit can work in us. The devil was unmasked and revealed in the temptations in the wilderness. Here, in the week which leads to our Lord's arrest, to trial and execution, we see how human words and motives can serve the purposes of the evil one. This too is a warning for us.

The exposition of the psalm in this passage is not something of minor importance in the Gospels. This psalm is quoted or alluded to 37 times in the New Testament, more than any other Old Testament passage.⁹ On the one hand, we know that it is not an easy thing either to love God or to love our neighbour. We expect to struggle to keep this commandment. But the struggle we face is not simply about doing the right thing. The struggle, the trial and the temptation, is a trial of the intellect. Do we know or believe the right thing? Over and over again, the Lord suggests that belief is not just something which happens to us. We have a responsibility for what we believe. The kind of knowledge we can have of God is a knowledge that we cannot control or verify according to strictly human standards. We are invited to recognize David's Lord come also as David's son, but we are not forced to do so. We are invited to hear our Lord speaking to the Father in the Psalms, but we are not forced to do so. These are tests and trials. It is all too easy in a place of education to imagine that faith is contrary to reason and learning rather than the key to reason in learning. In the worlds of St Augustine: 'This is important, dearly beloved, so concentrate on what I am about to say. Because our righteousness comes through faith, and our hearts are cleaned by

⁹ P 425, Bruner

faith so that we may be fit so see what we have believed in [...] faith means believing in what you do not see and [...] attaining to vision in due time.’ For Augustine, this is both the message and the promise of our Lord’s exposition of the psalm.¹⁰

This way of reading the Bible or reading the Psalms changes how we see the world –

Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*: ‘You never enjoy the World aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the Wisdom and Power of God: The World is a mirror of infinit Beauty, yet no man sees it.’¹¹

Today, we are invited to hear again the divine Son speaking to us in human words, to recognize Him come to us in human form, to perceive Him in the weak and beautiful signs of the bread and wine.

St Paul speaks with the wisdom of God when he expresses his confidence when he gives thanks ‘for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge’

Enlightened and enlivened by the word of God, let us also see the Son of David and the Son of God who comes to give Himself to us, that we may be all the more ‘enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge’.

¹⁰ Boulding translation, p 269

¹¹ Thomas Traherne (c. 1636 - 1674)

27 ‘You never enjoy the World aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the Wisdom and Power of God: ... Wine by its moysture quenbeth my Thirst, ...but to see it flowing from his Lov who gav it unto man. Quenbeth the Thirst even of the holy angels. To Consider it, is to Drink it spirituallly.

28 Your enjoyment of the World is never right, till evry morning you awake in heaven: see your self in your fathers Palace: and look upon the skies and the earth and the air, as Celestial Joys: ...

29 You never enjoy the World aright, till the sea it self floweth in your Veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and Crowned with the 30 stars: Till you can sing and rejoyce and Delight in GoD...

31 Yet further, you never enjoy the World aright, till you so lov the Beauty of enjoying it, that you are Covetous and earnest to persuade 10 others to enjoy it. ...

The World is a mirror of infinit Beauty, yet no man sees it. ...It is a region of Light and Peace, did not men Disquiet it. It is the Paradice of God.It is the Place of angels, and the Gate of heaven.’