

Sermon for Trinity 18

One of the great unanswerable questions is how much First Century history and geography should the sincere and devout Christian know? It helps a little to know that the Holy Land is about the size of Wales, it helps a lot to know that Jews held pigs to be unclean. Today's Gospel gives us a dispute about the descent and status of the Messiah. The idea of the Messiah is fundamental to Christianity (in fact the word 'Christ' is merely Greek for Messiah) but comparatively few Christians (including myself!) know much about the subject. When I was young, and in the churches that I attended, there was profound ignorance about it. It was commonly supposed that the Messiah was expected to be God made flesh, so the failure to recognize our Lord as the Messiah was absolutely culpable and perverse. In fact, no one expected this figure to be divine, although some of the ancient expectations had [possibly] supposed that he were a supernatural figure of some kind. There are [disputed] hints of this in Daniel. As far as the Old Testament goes, however, there are little more than hints. There is no Messianic treatise anywhere, just odd, suggestive lines in the prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, and one or two Psalms; and it is from the Psalms that our Lord is quoting today.

So, more history... It came to be believed that God's proper name – which has been variously rendered as Jehovah and Yahweh – should never be uttered; so no one now knows how to pronounce it (or spell it with vowels). In the good old King James Bible we often see the title “the LORD” in small capitals. When we do, it is well to remember that this stands for God's proper name, rather than just God. So we have the confusion of today's passage, where we have *three lords* and no idea how they can possibly relate to one another. So, to clarify the passage: it is presumed that King David is speaking/prophesying “God said to my lord (taken to mean the Messiah) sit thou at on my right hand...” [Remember no first century Jew “read” the psalms as we do – they pronounced them, and the standard pronounced substitution for the unutterable Name was also “my Lord”.] Now to presume that David composed these words is another assumption. By the Nineteenth Century it was increasingly supposed that David had little or nothing to do with the Psalms, the debate continues. One problem is that the Psalms are something of a mystery. If we think of them as the hymn-book of the Jerusalem Temple might be slightly better than thinking of David as a sort of poet-laureate. [“Of David” in the heading might simply mean “from the royal collection”.] By introducing this thorny subject of Davidic authorship we have also raised the question of what – as God Incarnate – Christ “should” have known and taught.

The point about this particular passage, however, is that Christ was not positively imparting information but posing a question. Why do the Pharisees insist that the Messiah must be of Davidic descent if David himself calls him his lord? The idea here is that the ancestor must be greater than his descendent, an idea, incidentally, that we today need not share? Nevertheless, the superiority of David does seem to be presumed here, so Christ's argument is that the Messiah is *not* David's descendent. Possibly Christ is arguing from the position of Daniel [perhaps in subsequent interpretation, though this is far from certain], where the Messiah is taken as a supernatural figure sent from heaven? Again we get rather tied up in multiplying questions because, elsewhere, considerable emphasis is laid upon Jesus's own Davidic descent, not least the Nativity accounts from Luke and Matthew. Our Lord Himself never seems to disavow the title, although He enjoins secrecy. We are left wondering if Jesus thought of Himself as David's son or not, but certainly He seems to see Himself as the expected Messiah who has come, and who *will come yet again*.

So, what are we to make of these historical footnotes and loose ends? Certainly King David has limited significance for us here in Northern Europe and in the 21st. Century, although such pragmatism is a most dangerous path to go down! For us, the essential truth is that the Christ (Messiah) indeed was sent from heaven but (as the Epistle to the Hebrews opens) not that He was an angel (in the sense of a bodiless, created being). The Christ is an angel in the sense that He was *sent*, but in the fullest sense He is God's Eternal Son who took our nature from His mother the Virgin Mary. The idea of the Messiah, God's Agent, sent from heaven is, therefore, one of the largest ‘building blocks’ of our understanding of who the Christ is.

Moreover, we are living in the indeterminate time between His coming in humility and His coming in glory. It is not particularly comfortable to be living in this gap, and the earliest Christians wanted to hasten this time, to bring about the final appearance of the Lord from heaven while they were yet alive. We have rather lost sight of this great hope. We look back to Christ's crucifixion as the culmination of His mission (which it wasn't) and we look forward to some sort of personal survival after our earthly lives (with not much relish, it has to be said!). The coming of the Lord in glory, however, would seem to be as far away from our minds as possible. Well, admittedly, it is very hard to picture, to conceptualize, so this accounts for some of our reluctance.

The more worrying truth, however, is that we do not yearn with every fibre of our being for our Blessed Lord, and for His triumphant self-vindication – even though we sing of it in our Advent hymns, most especially Wesley's fine composition [or rather revision] *Lo He Comes*. Well, can we, I wonder, invoke Charles Wesley's prayers? Now there is a theological question! If we can, we should certainly ask him to petition Almighty God for the grace that will make us crave the presence of Jesus, not just as a vague influence on our thinking, not even just in the sacrament of the Altar (another form of humiliated Presence) but in His glory, in His fullness, in His undiluted saving majesty.