

10.16.2022 Trinity 18 (Matthew 22:34-46)

The Old Testament book of Exodus tells the story of God delivering His people from centuries of slavery in Egypt. Through many miracles, and a series of ten plagues, God set the Israelites free and commanded them (Deuteronomy 9:23) to take possession of the land He had promised to their forefathers, *“a land flowing with milk and honey”* (Exodus 3:8). When the Israelites arrived at Kadesh Barnea, at the border of the Promised Land, they sent out twelve spies to investigate this area, the fruit of the land, and the people who lived there. When these spies returned after forty days, ten of the twelve gave a bad report, saying, *“We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own sight, and we must have seemed the same to them!”* (Numbers 13:1-33).

Two of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb, disagreed with the ten, but the people believed the negative report, they lost heart and rebelled. Once again they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, lifted up their voices, wept aloud and said, *“If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness!”* (Numbers 14:2). The people of God stood at the edge of the Promised Land. They saw. They heard. They tasted. They were only a step away, but due to fear, unbelief, and disobedience they didn't enter in, and after wandering for forty years they ended up getting exactly what they asked for, because the people who cried out, *“If only we had died... in this wilderness,”* died in the wilderness. Joshua and Caleb were the only ones from that generation who entered into the land God promised to give them.

The generation of Israelites who perished in the wilderness were a people who died believing in God, but not believing God. They chose to remain where they were, just outside of the Promised Land, and died there because they didn't trust His promises or obey His command to step out in faith and receive what He had already given to them, and there's a parallel between the story of Israel and the events described in our Gospel reading today.

In St. Mark's Gospel account of that day, we read about a scribe who asked Jesus, *“Which is the first commandment of all? Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor*

*as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these. So the scribe said to Him, Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:28-34).*

*You are not far from the kingdom of God.* The words our Lord spoke to the scribe are an encouragement, and a warning. *You are not far...* Like the Israelites, this scribe stood at the edge of *the Promised Land - the kingdom of God.* In the presence of our Lord, with an understanding that love of God and neighbor *is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,* the scribe saw, heard, even tasted the fruit of God’s kingdom. He was only a step away. All that remained was to take the most important step, and enter in.

Anglicans believe God provides “all things necessary” (Article VI) for those He created, in His *image and likeness* (Genesis 1:27), to enter in to His kingdom. St. Paul expressed that truth when he wrote to Timothy that God “*desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4). St. Peter wrote in his second epistle that “*The Lord is... patient toward you, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9). While there are people who use their God-given freedom to refuse His gifts of grace and love, people who God, through His permissive will allows to go their own way on the broad road (Matthew 7:13), the truth remains that perfect will of God is revealed in the fact that “*God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him*” (John 3:17), and that’s exactly what we see Jesus reaching out to accomplish in this world, and in a personal way, with this scribe.

When the scribe approached our Lord, he did so in the middle of a bitter confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of that time. The Pharisees had devised a scheme to “*entangle Him in His words*” (Matthew 22:15), and with the Herodians, they asked the seemingly impossible question, “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*” (Matthew 22:17). The Sadducees had crafted a plan to destroy His reputation, and their question was about a woman, widowed seven times. They asked, “*In the resurrection... whose wife will she be?*” (Matthew 22:28). Finally, this scribe approached our Lord to test Him, and asked, of the more than 600 commands

in the Law, “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?*” (Matthew 22:36).

All of these religious leaders set diabolical traps. They asked Jesus this series of seemingly impossible questions hoping to get Him to say something that would discredit Him, or get Him arrested, but what these men meant for evil, God used for good (Genesis 50:20), for in the middle of this bitter confrontation the scribe and our Lord shared a moment of peace, truth, and clarity. Their exchange may have begun with the scribe setting out to *test* our Lord (Matthew 22:35), but when Jesus so perfectly stated that every commandment is kept by loving God and neighbor, when He made it clear that “*love is the fulfillment of the law*” (Romans 13:10), the truth spoken in love (Ephesians 4:15) softened the heart of the scribe, and he simply agreed, “*Well said, Teacher.*”

So Jesus, and the scribe who set out to test Him, were no longer in any way a part of this bitter confrontation. They now stood together on the rock of Absolute, Objective Truth, and our Lord, knowing this man was *not far from the kingdom of God*, set out to help him take the final step with a few questions of His own, and unlike the religious leaders who asked their deceitful questions hoping to tear Jesus down, our Lord would ask these honest questions as a way to lift up and love all who heard His words.

While they were gathered together, Jesus asked, “*What do think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?*” They said to Him, “*The Son of David.*” He said to them, “*How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls Him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet””? If David then calls Him Lord, how is he His Son?*” And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask Him any more questions (Matthew 22:42-46).

We may feel led to interpret that final statement, which tells us no one was able to answer Him and none dared to ask Him any more questions, in such a way that we think Jesus intended to silence or even embarrass these men, but we know that’s not correct, because “*God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.*” Jesus isn’t trying to silence these men, He’s trying to save them. He wants to help them step over the boundary of fear, unbelief, and disobedience that is keeping them from *the kingdom of God*, the obstacle that’s keeping them from Him., and so Jesus asked these experts in the Law what they thought of the promised Messiah.

When He asked, these men stated that the promised Messiah is the Son of David, yet they also agreed that in Psalm 110:1 David referred to the coming Messiah as His Lord. Therefore, the question becomes: How could the promised Messiah be both David's son, and his Lord? In other words, if the Christ was a man who would not be born until generations after David's death, then how could His forefather David call Him Lord? This was the question these men could not, or would not answer. This is a question that no one can answer unless they "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Scriptures that our Lord used to reveal the truth that He, the Christ, the promised Messiah, was not only David's son, but was and is the Divine Son of God, David's Lord, co-eternal and co-equal with both God the Father and God the Spirit.

*What do think about the Christ?* This was the question our Lord asked the scribe and the religious leaders that day. This is a question we should ask ourselves, because when we consider the example of this man who was "*not far from the kingdom of God,*" perhaps the most important lesson we learn is that we are all either inside the kingdom of God, or outside His kingdom, depending on who Jesus is to us.

*What do think about the Christ?* By the grace of God may we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and broken hearts prepared to receive the truth of who Jesus is to the end that we may, by grace through faith, take possession of that which our Savior Christ has already given to us: adoption as sons and daughters of God, the power of His Holy Spirit dwelling in us, His Body given and His Blood shed for the remission of sin, life everlasting. Rather than standing just outside the Promised Land, may we step out in faith and take possession of these unearned, undeserved, gracious gifts of love, and live joyful lives in the kingdom of God now in this earthly life, and evermore in the world to come.