**The Centre of Everything**

We are back to Matthew after our time in Exodus last week (Of Nephilim and Grasshoppers) and Philippians (The 4:4 Response to Life) the week before. This week The Centre of Everything and our text is Matt 22:34-46.

If you are one of those people who doesn’t like conflict you would not have been comfortable traveling with Jesus. His life was far less about miracles and extraordinary encounters of healing, than it was about the contest of ideas that he found himself embroiled in with his contemporary religionists. This competition of ideas in culture has always been and continues to be Christianity’s lot. And it’s why we need to have some sophistication in our faith.

In our scene today Jesus debates with his contemporaries. Those who come are the top scholars of Jerusalem from multiple religious parties, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and scribes.

So you can see it is a really rich passage. These rabbinic “gotcha” conversations were a standard feature of religious discussion in that day, normally good natured, good Jewish family arguments.

But here the questions come with ill intent. The Pharisees plotted to entrap him (Matt 22:15), the Sadducees attempt to trip him up on the resurrection question (Matt 22:23ff). Then, coming to our passage for the week, the Pharisees step back in, tag team style, and hit Jesus with the greatest commandment question.

And then he asks them about Psalm 110:1, our focus for the morning beginning in vs 34.

I’ve attended lots of academic conferences down through the years, the best part of which was you could buy the latest books for a song from the publishers. The other highlight was always hearing the top people in your field hold forth on panels and in question and answer settings. There is nothing like hearing the experts disagree to help you understand what the issues really are.

So when we see Jesus in a back-and-forth with his contemporaries it is something like a battle of the titans, a rabbinical smackdown. And many of these exchanges probably occurred in a rather good-natured environment.

These conversations, however, come on the cusp of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem, so we read these texts with that sense of danger and foreboding.

A word about this style of disputation: the questions, called boruth in rabbinic parlance, are asked by these dueling rabbis, not only to catch Jesus out in a matter of doctrine, but to pose a question that will embarrass him no matter how he answers.

Boruth is definitely our word for the week – so obscure you don’t even need to bother looking it up on your phone dictionary.

So, e.g., Jesus, should we pay taxes to the emperor.

Or, if a man dies and leaves seven wives to whom will he be married in the afterlife. Jesus says you are all wrong, you don’t know the Scriptures or the power of God.

**In the Text**

So let’s go to our text, Matthew 22:34ff, and Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 110:1. The question is about the common Jewish tradition that the Messiah is to be the Son of David (2 Sam 7:12-14; cf Jer 30:9; in the NT see Acts 2:34ff; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Heb 1:3, 13).

Here Jesus turns the tables on his interlocutors and poses his own riddle.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by 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”’?

This is the boruth Jesus fires back at his adversaries. If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

How can both of these things be true? It’s unanswerable and his opponents shuffle their feet, look at each other and stare at the ground.

… nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Look at it closely. He doesn’t actually say he is talking about himself. But he does see it as a messianic text - an assertion by Jesus of the most profound importance.

He doesn’t say, ‘I am this everlasting Messiah, having been born of a woman, the ‘son of David’ but nonetheless pre-existing and above all things, even (especially) David. It is I who sits at the right hand of God.’ That is the solution to my ***boruth***! He doesn’t say that. We could debate about why. His identity is so hidden in the Gospel of Mark that it is called the “messianic secret.”

But, of course, his first followers immediately made the Psalm 110 connection after he had been raised from the dead. They quickly came to incorporate this Psalm into the basic understanding of Jesus and that the resurrection from the dead ***proved*** that he was this very Messiah of Psalm 110 (see Matt 22:44; Acts 2:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Heb 1:3, 13).

So on the very day of Pentecost we get this scene. Peter preaches:

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”’

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:34-36)

From the Text

So what can we take into our week from such esoteric texts as these? Applying this passage is a bit of a challenge, so bear with me if you will because it’s going to get a bit philosophical. But that’s alright, we have to go where our text takes us.

The first point I would make is one that we have been making since Easter – that the resurrection is The Great Affirmation of everything that we believe about God; that we are resurrection people.

Why is this important in the contest of ideas today? This idea distills the debate about faith and reason into a single proposition. The entire intellectual struggle for faith weighs on this point.

We can’t prove the resurrection. We just know the first followers bore witness to it. Our personal experience bears witness to it. But we can’t prove it.

Because we stand in the presence of this mystery. And yes, my sceptical friend, there is a leap of faith here.

About a year ago I spoke on the Cradle to Cross Mystery of the Faith we talked about the “mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:1) and the two large ideas of our faith, hope and mystery. Here we that mystery in its full glory in the resurrection

**Sidebar**: If you don’t mind let’s do a philosophical sidebar because I think it is important to not condemn those who doubt but to understand doubt. Won’t we be better witnesses if we understand Christianity’s position in the contest of ideas? So we try. We aren’t grasshoppers, those who cannot believe aren’t Nephilim!

I’m not a philosopher but I do know something about the faith vs reason and science debates in the 19th and 20th century in the field of religion.

You have heard me mention D.F. Strauss in our Easter message this year. He was one of the first to challenge the idea that the miracles of the Bible, like the resurrection, really happened. Read about Strauss on Wikipedia and you will learn about how doubt of God has taken hold in our world. His main work on this was published in 1848. I happen to have the English translation of 1855 falling apart on my shelf at home.

In 1958 Rudolf Bultmann published *Jesus Christ and Mythology* where he argued that Christianity’s moral basis was excellent, ***if*** it were “demythologized,” i.e. all reliance on the idea of miracle were abandoned. It was the only way Christianity would survive in the modern world he said.

These ideas have carried the day for the past 170 years, from Strauss to Bultmann. Their notion that belief in the miraculous must give ground to reason and science basically won over world.

Hence, the long decline of the place in Christianity in the 20th-21st century culture, including faith in the Bible, even in large portions of the Christian confession around the world. Many liberal Christians would be embarrassed by this discussion. You can’t really ignore this trend, it’s kind of a crucial thing for us as Christians. It is important our lives bear witness to the mystery of the faith.

If you think this doesn’t matter, look at the rise of atheistic materialism in Europe (Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx) and the political movements that rose on the shoulders of atheistic materialism. It was its abandonment of the notion of our God-given human dignity, something central to Christian doctrine, that set the stage for Lenin, Hitler, Mao.

You want to talk about apocalyptic, study these men and their political movements in the 20th century that rose on the shoulders of atheistic materialism, and there you find tens and tens of millions of dead from war and famine.

But I say to you, that we are the people of the resurrection.

I think this matters because today we live in an age of apathy and disinformation. Some people, frankly a discouraging number within evangelicalism, seem willing to believe any nonsense that is presented to them, for example QAnon. In this age of apathy we should remind ourselves, it matters what we believe in.

And while resurrection may just seem to be a concept to the mind, this idea transforms the way we think about everything, it defines the Christian mind, and transforms the way meet the challenges of daily life, the way we look at every aspect of life and death.

 Having trouble with co-workers, do you have a jerk for manager? or a family situation. The Risen Jesus is within you and his power is present in your life. We do not live as those who have no hope!

Third, there is victory. The militaristic images of Psalm 110:1 are pretty shocking really. It reminds me of Assyrian and Egyptian battle murals. The right place for your enemies is under your feet.

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But Jesus said love your enemies. The victory here is life over the dominion of death. The victory of resurrection over the finality of the grave. As Paul says, alluding to Psalm 110, For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death…Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? (1 Cor 15:26, 55; Hosea 13:14).

And here is really the heart of Psalm 110 for us. There is a centre of everything. In spite of appearances sometimes, there is a throne at the centre of all being.

 Upon that throne we find God the Father with our Saviour Jesus Christ seated at his right hand. The firstborn of the dead, the hope of our salvation, and the hope of all the world. Amen