



Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 4 July 2021

READINGS

2 Samuel 5: 1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Mark 6: 1-13

Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

Good morning Friends. We have a strange and ironic combination of lectionary readings this Sunday. David is anointed in the context of his office as king three times – the first in 1 Samuel 16, where Samuel is commanded by God to go to the house of Jesse and find a new king for Israel (we read of this on Youth Sunday), he is anointed king of Judah, the southern territory of Israel in 2 Samuel 2, and finally he is anointed king of Israel (the northern territory) which made him king over Israel in its entirety in the passage we heard today.

It is in fact the leader of the tribes of Israel who approach David, according to the narrative, and request that he be king over them. Later in verse 10 we read that, “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.” For the purpose of greater clarity and insight into this passage, I’m going to read the verses which immediately follow the passage we heard just now [read 2 Samuel 5:11 -16]. So certainly we have a picture of David assuming the position of a mighty king in the region. Not just that, but we know that David’s rule over Israel represented the height not only of David’s power, but of that of the united kingdom of Israel itself. The fact that we read of the king of Tyre sending cedars and masons and carpenters to Jerusalem means that the kingdom of Tyre would have been subservient to the kingdom of Israel in as far as the cedars and masons and carpenters would have been a form of tribute.

Now we know that historically, or theologically, or thematically there are meant to be close associations between Jesus and David. The Gospel of Matthew goes to great lengths in compiling its genealogy of Jesus, to show that his ancestry can be traced back to David. Jesus is referred to at times in the Gospels as the Son of David. Part of the reason for this close association stems from long-held expectations about the Messiah – not only would the Messiah come in the lineage of David, but the Messiah would be like David and exercise an office similar to that of David. In other words, not only would the Messiah exercise a spiritual office or function, but a fundamentally political one too. The Messiah was believed to have been able to exorcise all of Israel’s political enemies and re-establish the former glory of the kingdom of Israel.

I’m sure that none of this is unfamiliar to us. While we can readily understand and accept why it might be necessary to establish a connection between Jesus and David at a theological level, most serious scholars are dubious as to whether there was a genealogical connection between Jesus and David and are even less confident as to whether this can actually be traced with any certainty. Let us then consider our Gospel reading which, once more, is a very enlightening passage as to the life of the historical Jesus. It is almost a sequel to the passage of Mark 3:20-35, a passage we reflected on a few weeks ago. Mark 6:1-13

begins by recording Jesus' so-called rejection at Nazareth. Perhaps we can begin then by asking, if Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, his hometown, on what basis was he rejected?

It seems that initially the townspeople of Nazareth are impressed by Jesus' teaching and deeds, however this soon changes to a mood of incredulity, as the townspeople recall their familiarity with Jesus. It is in fact, not only their familiarity with Jesus, but also what they know about his background. They begin by asking the question incredulously: is this not the carpenter? Carpentry, unlike in our own day, was not exactly a respected profession. In fact, a trade of any kind was viewed disparagingly. The reason for this is that the majority of the population (90-95%) were small-scale subsistence farmers. This was what would be referred to in modern economic terms as a peasant-agrarian economy. So whereas we might view such a society and economy as being backward and underdeveloped this was not exactly the case in the time of Jesus. For most of the population, one's purpose and identity was very much tied up with the land. Therefore to farm and cultivate the land was seen not only as something worthwhile and honourable, but as being a commandment of God.

For one to be a tradesman, such as carpenter, would mean that in all likelihood one would have been forced off one's land through the large-scale system of land-indebtedness which we know was in place in first-century Judea and Galilee. Scores of people were having their land confiscated by the temple authorities and other privateers after having pledged their land as surety. There is more detail to this phenomenon, but this should suffice for now. The fact then that Jesus is referred to as a carpenter is not a neutral comment but rather quite disparaging.

I'm afraid it doesn't get much better with the next term of reference they use for Jesus – "the son of Mary". We might gloss over this as being inconsequential. After all, Jesus was indeed Mary's Son. It was however highly uncommon and irregular for men to be referred to with reference to their mothers. In fact, this was only ever done when the father of the child was uncertain or unknown, as was in fact the case with Jesus. Once again, the reference to Jesus as "the son of Mary" is derogatory and would have cast aspersions as to Jesus' moral character. This indeed, is the whole point of this incident. The townspeople of Nazareth knew that a.) Jesus came from a poor and probably indebted family and; b.) the identity of Jesus' father had never been established. This is certainly not someone who fits the mould of a prophet, let alone a Messiah.

Our English translation of Jesus' profession as that of carpentry is misleading, for the Greek word is more generic and could refer to a number of different building activities. A stone mason for example would have fallen into the same category but would have held no greater esteem or stature. In verse 11 of 2 Samuel 5, we read that the king of Tyre sent cedar trees and carpenters and masons to build David a house. Of course, we know that the "house" was really a palace and became the nerve-centre of the mighty kingdom of Israel. These two images are strangely contrasted for us in the presentation of David, a mighty and noble king, who militarily vanquishes the enemies of Israel and increases the might and glory the kingdom of Israel, a veritable mini-empire of the region, like none before him; and Jesus of Nazareth, a lowly builder, perhaps not unlike those who would have been conscripted to build David's palace, who likely owned no land and therefore partly lacked his own identity, who to the people around, was of questionable birth, and who died at the hands of the most brutal empire in antiquity.

St Paul, in our New Testament reading set for today, tempers these two extremes: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).