

SERMON NOTES

Fifth Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Synaxis Gospel
Mark 12:35-44

WHO IS THE CHRIST?

INTRODUCTION

Our reading today encompasses three episodes in a day in the life of Jesus shortly before He was crucified. This is an important day because it is the last time that Jesus taught the people in general. The first two episodes contain His last teaching to the crowds in the Temple of Jerusalem, while the last begins His final teachings to His disciples alone.

In order to better understand the message in this reading, we need to look at the context, in terms of what was happening at the time, and also in terms of the reading's place in the structure of the Gospel of Mark. The time is, as mentioned above, a day or two before the Crucifixion, during the time we designate today as "Holy Week." Jesus had come to Jerusalem, entering the city with the kingly symbolism of the promised Messiah (Christ).¹ The following day, He cleansed the Temple of the desecrating merchants and their stalls. The angry religious rulers retaliated by seeking to entrap Jesus into saying something incriminating for which He could be arrested. They failed miserably, and most of them left to plot how they might secretly seize Him.

The Evangelist, Mark, has chosen a few of the episodes of Jesus' last days of teaching in the Temple to include in his Gospel. Key words link them together. The words 'scribe' and/or 'widow' link the three episodes in our reading for today.

The scribes are mentioned as a part of the group of religious leaders who opposed Jesus. In the verses just preceding our reading, an intelligent scribe was impressed with the responses Jesus had given to his adversaries. He therefore posed his own question to Jesus: "What commandment is the most important of all?"

Jesus answered by quoting from the scribe's own area of expertise, the Law of Moses, "HEAR O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' And the second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'"

Though the episode that contains this question and answer is not included in our reading today, the thread that ties the three episodes of our reading together begins with this answer to this scribe's question. We shall see that those who teach the Law are very often breakers of the Law, especially of this most important one.

¹ According to prophecy, the king would be riding on the back of a donkey. See Zechariah 9:9

SYNTAXIS READING

Mark 12:35-44

And Jesus answering began to say, as He taught in the Temple,

“How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself said in the Holy Spirit,

‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT THINE ENEMIES BENEATH THY FEET.’

David himself calls Him ‘Lord’; and so in what sense is He his son?”

And the great crowd enjoyed listening to Him. And in His teaching He was saying: “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets,

who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation.”

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the multitude were putting money into the treasury;

and many rich people were putting in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

NOTES

Episode I

And Jesus answering began to say, as He taught in the Temple,

Apparently, during the days of His last visit to Jerusalem, the venue of Jesus’ teaching was the Temple courts.

“How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?”

The scribes were the recognized experts in the field of Jewish religious law. It was their profession to study, preserve, and interpret the laws of Moses as well as the other Holy Scriptures.

Christ is another word for *Messiah* and it literally means *the anointed one*. The kings in the tradition of the Jews were anointed with oil signifying the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The anointed kings were the vice-regents of God, Who was the real king. In the kingdom of Judah, the capital city of which was Jerusalem, a legitimate king must be descended from the great king David. But for hundreds of years there had not been a scion from the royal family of David enthroned in Jerusalem. *The Messiah* (or *the Christ*) had become a term that referred exclusively to the final rightful king who was expected to ascend the throne and reign over a kingdom that would never end. The prophets had foretold that the Christ will usher in a time of unparalleled peace on earth, and that all the Gentile nations would look to Him for justice. During His reign the whole earth will worship the One true God.

David himself said in the Holy Spirit,

Jesus recognized that King David was not only a king, but also a prophet that spoke by the power of the Holy Spirit. The quotation from the Hebrew is actually introduced, in the Old Testament, with a word, נא (‘n^coom’), which indicates that what follows is a Divine utterance given through a prophet.

‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD,

These words are all in caps to indicate a direct quote from the Old Testament. This quotation is from Psalm 110. Unhappily, written this way, the distinction between the first use of the word “LORD” and the second “LORD” is erased. However, if we were to read this quotation in Hebrew we would see that the first “LORD” is actually the four Hebrew characters יהוה (YHVH) that stand for the unpronounced name of God.² The second “LORD” is a translation of another Hebrew word, אדני (Adonai), which literally means *my Lord*. Since the Jews never pronounced the sacred Name, when they read aloud a passage that contained it, they pronounced instead “Adonai.” In this quotation for instance they would read aloud, “Adonai said to Adonai, ‘Sit ...’” This confusion would not be a problem for the scribes who saw the actual Hebrew characters and understood that there was a distinction between the two words.

² Normally in modern English translations of the Old Testament, the four Hebrew characters יהוה (YHVH, referred to as the Tetragrammaton), are indicated by the word LORD (written in caps). The word LORD is used as a substitution for the unpronounceable Name of God, YHVH. Some older English translations due to a misunderstanding have mistakenly translated the Name as *Jehovah*. This mistake was made because the Jews themselves orally substituted the term *Lord* (*Adonai*) for YHVH and indicated it should be so read by placing the vowels for Adonai under the four holy Hebrew characters. The earlier translators did not realize that the vowels did not actually belong with the four consonants.

In the Greek New Testament κύριος (*kurios*) is the Greek word for *lord*. Therefore both YHVH (LORD) and *lord* are translated by a form of the same word. Although this can be frustrating for English readers, the Greek New Testament writers were simply observing the pious custom of protecting the Tetragrammaton from pronunciation. One must look up the quotation in the Hebrew Old Testament to see the distinction between the two terms.

The Armenian Bible, since it was translated from the Greek, uses a form of *der* for the corresponding form of *kurios*. In Mark 12:36 the Armenian Bible translates both forms of *kurios* with a capitalized form of DER. So, once again, the distinction between the two terms is lost.

SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,

In the quotation we have God addressing Adonai and telling Him to sit at God's "right hand." In those days, the sword was worn on the right side and, thus, the right side or the right hand was seen as the position from which power was drawn. "The right hand of God" is a euphemism for *the position of ultimate power*. This position of ultimate power is the position Adonai is told to take.

UNTIL I PUT THINE ENEMIES BENEATH THY FEET.'

When a victor conquered another, he placed his foot on the head of the vanquished one. This was a symbolic act that demonstrated the prostrate submission of the one who had been overcome by the victor. The quotation promises that God will cause all of Adonai's enemies to submit to Him.

David himself calls Him, Lord; and so in what sense is He his son?"

Psalms 110 was known to refer to the Messiah (Christ). There would be no question in the mind of the scribes that the second word translated "Lord" (Adonai) in the quotation was a reference to the Messiah (Christ).

The problem Jesus raises is this: Everyone knew that since the kings of Judah were the vice-regents of Almighty God, they properly had no lord over them except God Himself. David, as King of Israel, had only God as his Lord. This quotation only makes sense if God becomes David's son, that is, if He becomes incarnate. Then God Almighty can say to God Incarnate, "Sit ..." and David must call Him Lord.

Put this concept together with the prefaced words of the greatest commandment—"Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is One LORD"—and we see why Jesus posed this question.

What the scribes seem to have overlooked in their teaching was that the Messiah (Christ) would not only be David's descendent, He would also be the One God Incarnate. Jesus in His discussion with the intelligent scribe had told him that he was not far from the Kingdom of God. When the scribe comes to understand this important point about the Messiah (Christ) and then bows to His Lordship as David did, he will be in the Kingdom of God.

And the crowd enjoyed listening to Him.

Whether the crowd understood all that Jesus was saying to the scribes and the other religious leaders is doubtful. However, they probably did relish the fact that at last someone, this friend of the common folk, could take on, and trounce the 'high and mighty' who looked down on them and lorded it over them.

Episode II

And in His teaching He said:

Turning back to the crowds who had witnessed the debate, Jesus addressed them.

"Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets,

The scribes performed a useful service. They studied the Law found in the Books of Moses (the Pentateuch: the first 5 books of the Old Testament) and they carefully preserved it. They also interpreted the Law and, thus, had judicial responsibilities. They were the lawyers of the first century in the Jewish culture. It is not clear if they were even permitted to charge for their scribal

services, but it was certainly not usual for them to be paid. Their income had to come from other sources.

The scribes, like the priests, wore long white linen robes that came to the foot with a long fringe at the bottom. This was the robe of distinction and honor, much like the robes of honor that professors wear at graduation ceremonies today. It set them apart from the common people.

Biblical Greek did not have commas. Some English translations place a comma after the word “scribes.” This punctuation indicates that all scribes are meant in the warning. The translation we have chosen does not place a comma after “scribes” and indicates that only the scribes who are further described by Jesus are meant. They are the ones who wanted glory for themselves—the recognition and honor that placed them above other people. They wanted to be greeted in a deferential way, with formal titles. They wanted to be seated in the place of honor in front of the Torah Scroll in the synagogue. They wanted to be seated at the elevated table of honor at banquets or dinner parties. Jesus warned the people to beware of this *kind* of scribe.

The first and most important commandment is to love the LORD with our whole being. Those whose entire being is set upon self elevation and promotion are too busy with their own glory to care about God’s. They worship themselves.

who devour widows’ houses,

In those days, widows were frequently poor, vulnerable, and easily exploited. The scribes of Jesus’ warning did exploit them. “Widows’ houses” refers to the widows’ resources for livelihood. Protection and care for widows is expressly commanded in the Law which the scribes so diligently studied³. So this behavior that Jesus condemns is particularly shameful for those who knew the Law.

The intelligent scribe in the episode just preceding our reading had complimented Jesus for adding that the second most important commandment is “to love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus here points out the absolute failure of the honor-seeking scribes to keep that very important commandment.

and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers;

Even so, these hypocritical scribes want to impress and be known as very pious people.

these will receive greater condemnation.”

At the final judgment of God, these hypocrites will be extraordinarily punished. Those who study and teach are judged more heavily than their students. This is a warning to all who teach. Let us be careful in our studies and in our teaching, allowing it to correct first of all our own behavior. Above all, let everything be done only for God’s glory!

Episode III

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the multitudes were putting money into the treasury;

The temple had several courtyards, one of which was the court of the women. In this court were thirteen trumpet shaped receptacles for free will contributions and offerings. Opposite one of these Jesus sat down and watched the people as they put their money into it.

³ Deuteronomy 14:28-29. Every three years all the tithes of the produce of the people for that year was to be brought out for the support of widows, orphans, and others who had no means of livelihood.

and many rich people were putting in large sums.

These rich people who could easily afford to contribute to the Temple were noticed by Jesus.

And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

Also, an extremely poor contributor was also noticed—a widow! She was just the type of person who was exploited by the *pious* scribes condemned by Jesus.

Her offering was not even a trifle compared to the others. She had two small copper coins, each of which was worth only 1/64th of a day's minimum wages. In today's currency, this would mean that she had two coins each worth about fifty-five cents. What can you buy for fifty-five cents? Not much, certainly not even a loaf of bread. Not even if she spent both of her coins!

And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

These two insignificant coins were worth more to God than all the other contributions put together.

for they all put in out of their surplus,

In reality, the contribution of the wealthy came from what they had left over after all their needs and desires were completely taken care of. They didn't feel it at all!

but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

Once this poorest of the poor dropped in her two coins—not even saving one for herself, she had nothing more. Today, one coin *might* have bought her a small candy bar, OR perhaps one small apple, OR two bananas to get her through one or two more days of life. But no, she dropped in even her last coin as an offering to God.

God was watching and her gift meant more to Him than all the others because of what it represented. This poor widow fulfilled the two greatest commandments. She loved God with her entire being and she loved her neighbor as herself. The intelligent scribe had rightly commented that obedience to the two greatest commandments “is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”⁴

APPLICATION

In the verse just before our reading for today, Jesus had stated the greatest commandment—love God with the whole self. Our reading ends with the example of a poor widow who gave her all to God. In between we note the highly respected, educated scribes missing the most important point about Who the Christ really is—the LORD they are called upon to worship with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The people are warned against the hypocrisy of these proud religious leaders who teach one thing and do the opposite—leaders who exploit the very type of person that obeys the greatest two laws that they teach.⁵

⁴Mark 12:33

⁵ This does not mean that the poor widow or those like her are sinless. Our Lord died for her sins as well as for ours.

Christ was not a teacher like the scribes or the other religious leaders. He was and is God. As the Incarnate God, as the perfect Man, He gave His all for the love of God and neighbor. He gave His life on the Cross that we might live.

Our Christ is not simply the “son of David,” the great King of Israel, who will usher in the peace for which this world longs and so desperately needs. He is all that is summed up in the title, LORD—the Creator, the Almighty God, the King of Heaven and Earth and the Judge of all mankind. He does not, like man, simply look on the outward actions of those who claim to worship Him. His eyes search our very hearts. He knows our motives as surely as He did those of the religious leaders and the poor widow of the first century.

Mark did not relate the episode of the poor widow to intimate that God demands that we drop every cent we own into the offering plate this Sunday. That was *her* way of *demonstrating* her total love for God and her neighbor. That we have total love of God and our neighbor *is* what He demands. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this love will lead us to make our own special demonstrations that our hearts, souls, minds and strength are completely devoted to Him. Whatever our love for our God leads us to do, it will certainly reflect our obedience to the second commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It should even lead us to obey Christ’s supreme commandment: “Love each other as I have loved you.”