

***+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.***

In this section of the gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches about his identity as the Son of God. This gospel was primarily written for the new Jewish-Christian converts in Jerusalem. Of course, every gospel records the words and events of Jesus himself and it has a message for every situation in every age. Each gospel, however, has a special emphasis which reflects the community to which it was intended.

Originally the gospel of the Lord was just 'the gospel.' There was no Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Instead, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus the disciples remembered his words and actions and they spoke about these things to the people who gathered to hear. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to deliver the message and carry on the work of Jesus. In the beginning it was oral tradition alone by the first disciples, and most likely the wider group of disciples who followed Jesus but were not named among the twelve, which carried on the story.

When the twelve disciples and their contemporaries began to die or be less able to travel and speak to groups of people the message began to be written down. Writing was an expensive venture in the ancient world. Very few people could read and less could write. The fabric for writing was rare – papyrus or vellum, which is animal skin. Re-use of the material was common so that the fabric became worn out, stretched and broken. The resources for writing were difficult to obtain for ordinary people. Also, the script at the time the first record of the gospels was written was in full capital letters with no gaps or punctuation marks. No wonder illiteracy in the ancient world was so high.

The first editions of the gospels were framed around a community of Christians. Each is an authentic record of Jesus. Each has an

emphasis which addressed the particular needs of the community to which it was directed. Some gospels have material which others leave out and some material is the same, but slightly different. Most scholars believe the gospel of Mark was the first gospel. Mark contains the 'bare bones' of the story of Jesus. There is little embellishment and the structure is simple and the language direct. Mark was likely intended for the new Christians in Rome. From Mark the other gospels drew, especially Matthew and Luke. John is quite different in character, but nonetheless contains the essential elements which make it the profoundly powerful gospel account that it is.

The community of Christians in Jerusalem which first heard the gospel of Matthew was made up of many Jewish converts. For Jews, it was essential that the Messiah be revealed to them through the predicted line of patriarchs and prophets, thus the expansive genealogy which opens the gospel of Matthew. If you have some time, have a read of chapter one of the gospel to verse 17. This is all the lineage information crammed in before the record of the birth of Jesus.

Jesus is thus named son of David, son of Abraham. It would be very difficult for Jews to accept that the long-awaited Messiah would come through any other way than that predicted in the law and the prophets of the Old Testament. This is the way of the incarnation, a necessary fact of salvation. The other gospels, Mark, Luke and John, have less emphasis on the Jewish tradition throughout, although the Jewish references are still prominent – of course, Jesus was a Jew and when he came, he fulfilled the Jewish law.

Therefore, we see the emphasis in today's section from the gospel of Matthew on the greatest commandment and on the cutting question Jesus asks the Pharisees, 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose

son is he?' The first part of Jesus' questioning they answer easily. The Pharisees have heard that Jesus silenced the Sadducees, another Jewish sect which firmly disbelieved in the resurrection, and they conspired with each other to undermine Jesus. Can you hear the cajoling in their voices, 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is greatest?'

Their attitude teeters at the point of outright offence. Imagine that you were in the gathered group, hearing the lawyers speaking firsthand – their accusatory tone, biting cynicism... 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' Any child could answer correctly. You must love the Lord your God with everything you have – heart, soul and mind. You must love the Lord your God absolutely, without reservation or second placing. Jesus then adds a second commandment: love your neighbour as yourself. It is through these things, loving God and neighbour that everything else depends. Without the unconditional love of God and neighbour nothing else in the bible makes sense. These two commandments are the foundation for all else, for all human activity.

Why did the Pharisees challenge Jesus about a simple fact of the law? What did they hope to achieve? Did they hope that by getting him to admit the commandments as priority that he would see himself in error? On the contrary, Jesus confronts them with a convoluted question which draws the whole scene back to himself and his identity as the Son of God. 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?'

From their Jewish tradition the Pharisees, falling into the very trap they tried to set Jesus, say immediately that the Messiah is the son of David. And knowing himself to be directly descended from David, just as we can work out from the genealogy in chapter one, Jesus challenges that David has enough spirit given intuition to work out

that the Messiah is the Lord himself, the one destined to sit at the right hand of God in eternity.

So why would David call his son 'Lord' if the son came later? Notice that Jesus does not provide an answer to his question directed back at the accusing Pharisees. They would have to work it out themselves that Jesus is alluding to the holy trinity, to the relationship between himself and God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The hierarchy is meaningless in the divine household. Son, Father and Spirit are all Lord. And Jesus claims that place, sat at the right hand for the duration of the creation. All this points to himself as the divine Son of God, the Lord in himself. And none of those listening knew how to challenge him back.

And for we today the commandments stand as a sure foundation for right living in right relationship with God and with one another. Let us never lose sight of their value in informing our faith and how we teach others. We have the benefit of the true knowledge that the Messiah is Jesus the Christ, that he is Son of God, and that he is set incarnationally in the line of David, affirming the arrival of the Jewish Messiah, the one who is the salvation for all the world, Jew and gentile alike. Let us be uplifted in spirit by the knowledge that Jesus is Messiah, that he fulfills the law and the prophets and that we know him as the Son of God. Thanks be to God.