

Collect: ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

The Epistle: Romans 13:8-14

OWE no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

The Gospel. Matthew 21:1-13

WHEN they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest. And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee. And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

The Finishing Touch

In our Gospel narrative this morning, we see Jesus taking conscious steps to conform his actions in order to put the finishing touch on prophecy – in this case an enigmatic prophecy of Zechariah *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.*¹

Indeed John uses this very word: *τελεω* to describe what is happening to Jesus on the cross: *After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now finished [τελεω] that the scripture might be fully finished [τελειωω], saith, I thirst. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished [τελεω] and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.* The author of Hebrews says that the law finished [τελειωω] nothing; but that Jesus death did.

Luke uses this same word describing how the drama of Jesus perfectly finishes Isaiah's extended prophetic discourse concerning the suffering servant of God in chapter 53: *For I say unto you, that this that is written must be finished [τελεω] in me, And he was reckoned among the transgressors: for the things concerning me have an ending.*² Jesus has already told the apostles why they are going to Jerusalem: so that all things written by the prophets concerning the son of man will be finished [τελεσθησεται]

We oftentimes think of Jesus as a unique solution to a prophetic prediction. But Jesus does not conform to the expected prophetic form. Thus the religious establishment hardly accepts him as a prophet, let alone the return of a King: *This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.*³

Thus I have repeatedly made the case that Matthew's argument is not to Jews - because Jesus is conforming to an entirely different program. Matthew claims Jonah is typological of this program. And once you understand the sign of Jonah – a prophet sent to the Gentiles - Matthew claims, all the rest of what you think that you know about the Christ, suddenly makes sense. Without that sign, nothing makes sense. John frustratingly editorializes: *But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him.*⁴ Matthew never makes this complaint.

Thus in Matthew, Jesus is constantly implying that the religious establishment doesn't *understand* Scripture; thus they don't know Christ. Imagine if Jesus came today and said that the Roman Catholic establishment did not know Scripture. Or that the Reformed Establishment did not know Scripture or that the Evangelical Establishment did not know Scripture. Or imagine if he came into St Peter's Basilica and began whipping cardinals and driving them out into the streets; or into a Reformed or Evangelical mega-church and started tearing out the sound system and overturning the drums and smashing the stage lights. This is the enormity of what we have here.

¹ 9:9

² Lu 22:37

³ Lu 7:39

⁴ Joh 12:37

So one of the ideas of *our* modern religious establishment that I try to get my students to examine and challenge is this: that Matthew is written to the Jews to prove to them that Jesus is the Christ because he alone conforms to the expected pattern of prophetic Scripture. And the way I do this is to marshal proof after proof after proof that Matthew is not writing to the Jews, that Matthew is not a direct argument for the messiahship of Jesus in conventional terms of “prediction,” and that Jesus does not conform to the expected Jewish pattern concerning the coming Messiah.

Matthew’s audience is far larger than the Jewish establishment. And that’s why, in Matthew, the Persian wise men of the East are the first of Jesus’ public audience to recognize him as the Messiah. And a Roman Centurion from the West is the last. The religious establishment mocks the message of Matthew: “Jesus was born in Bethlehem. So what? Oh what’s that you say: he was born of a virgin, too? Oh, well if we had know this, that would have changed everything. Why didn’t you say so? Had we known this, we would not have crucified him. And yet, how could we have known it, Matthew? It wasn’t public knowledge, was it? And it never could be public knowledge, because it will remain Mary’s word against the physics of pregnancy for a thousand generations.”

In the first part of Matthew, he appears to concede that Jesus is the Christ, saying: The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.⁵ And yet 15 sentences later, he seems to qualify his claim: And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is *called* Christ.⁶ And Matthew’s most direct statement that Jesus is the Christ is mildly implicit at best: *Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ he sent two of his disciples*⁷Is this a confession, or is he simply giving Jesus the benefit of the doubt, as perhaps Josephus would have done?

If I were a theological professor and I gave a classroom of students the assignment to prove that Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews, one of my first criticisms of Matthew’s submission would be this: “Matthew, your argument for the messiahship of Christ provides no direct support. The Old Testament quotations and allusions that you do provide are indirect, cryptic and you leave every single one of them under-developed. Take your reference to Rama for example ... You connect the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem by Herod to Jeremiah’s prophecy concerning those who had been deported from Judah to Babylon. But you do not explain this very oblique connection.

In fact, at the apparent climax of your story, where Peter appears to make the confession that you allege that Jesus is looking for, he then immediately tells his apostles: *that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.* Why not? You don’t explain why. In a paper that has as its purpose to openly declare Jesus’ Messiahship to the Jews, why do you have him sneaking around, apparently keeping it a secret from them? What does the divine son of God have to fear from the Sanhedrin Mafia?

⁵ Mt 1:1

⁶ Mt 1:16

⁷ Mt 11:2

Alright - so Jesus claims that he will be raised the 3rd day - as Lazarus was raised the 4th day and the widow of Nain's son and Jairus' daughter were both raised after a few days too. So what? What about the complete disgrace of Jesus' humiliation *before* the resurrection, how will his honor and his destiny as King of Israel be rehabilitated? This unrequited disgrace is hardly befitting of the once and future King of Israel. Yet you say nothing about this."

The obvious rejoinder? Matthew is not writing to the Jews. Nor is he proving to the Jews that Jesus conforms to the expected pattern of prophetic Scripture. Which would explain a myriad of other things that appear as mere coincidence or accident. Things that constantly grate against the expected interpretation of Matthew by even our own current religious establishment. Like being proclaimed King first by Gentile wise men. By being (incidentally) the object of perfect Gentile faith. And being proclaimed Son of God last by a Roman Centurion. And Matthew is not putting Jewish ideas into the mouths of Gentiles here. Because strictly speaking, the incarnation of the Son of God is not a Jewish idea. And Jesus takes advantage of this fact when he riddles the Sanhedrin with Psalm 110: *If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?*⁸ They are speechless because this theological category is completely foreign to them.

Thus it is here that the entire Gentile world understood what the Jews could not have understood. And that was the incarnation. The Gentiles understood how David's son could be David's Lord. For the Gentiles, the question was not *how* God (or the gods) could assume human form. The question was who was the son of God? The Egyptians claimed that Pharaoh was the son of God. The Greeks claimed that Alexander the Great was the Son of God. The Romans claimed that Augustus Caesar was the son of God.

This explains why Matthew is making an argument that is incomprehensible to the Jews but not to the Gentiles. Matthew is writing in a Jewish dialect, because this King comes from Palestine. Matthew is not writing to the Jews. He is writing to the Gentiles. He is not writing about the King of the Jews. He is writing about the King of the world. Thus, in Matthew, this *particular* incarnation of God is in its fullest sense: *Emmanuel* - God with us. This *particular* calling of Israel out of Egypt occurs in its fullest sense in Christ. This *particular* weeping over the children of Israel, is about every slaughter of Israel's children in an attempt to destroy their messianic role. Here it is in its fullest sense - from Pharaoh to Herod - from Egypt to Babylon to Rome - the messianic death of innocent children for the sake of the King.

The Gentiles understood Matthew's sense of typological fulfilment. There are the cryptic foreshadowings (as uttered by the Delphic oracles, for example) and then there is the prophetic fullness in the flesh of Jesus Christ. Even to this day we still do not know what Matthew means by a prophecy found nowhere in the Old Testament: *And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.*⁹ James and I have already discussed the fulfilled prophecy of Jeremiah even though he does not mention any thirty pieces of silver.

⁸ Mt 22:45

⁹ Mt 2:23

And so our Gospel proper this morning has Matthew lift a somewhat obscure prophecy from Zechariah 9:9 concerning one aspect of the once and future king – who is both God and Man. There is no contextual lead in. And there is no development afterward in Zechariah or in Matthew. Matthew's argument is an argument that the religious establishment of the time entirely missed; that Jesus Christ finishes all the typological prophetic patterns of **all** prophecy. Every single one of them. Matthew has simply chosen a *few* of them to show the Gentiles how that Jesus not only completes the prophetic cycle of the son of God which Alexander the Great prefigured, but that Jesus also prefigures the Son of man that the psalms of David and Ezekiel prefigured.

How can an entire religious establishment miss the message of Matthew? Easy. They are typological of us. And the audience never changes. And we should know. Search your feelings. We know how to play the game. There are many ways to get away from the Christ of Matthew. There is legalism. There is materialism. There is deism. And, of course there's heresy. And there is simply not reading Matthew at all. There are a thousand ways to not engage your lover. Revelation covers seven of them. Advent is a time to re-engage our faith. To examine our faith. To renew our faith. We can have a "retreat" any time. Traditionally, Advent was that time. It was a time to listen and to pray and to watch. As the feast of the Nativity approaches, let's do precisely that. I suggest that we read Matthew again sometime this Advent. And as we read, let's sympathetically listen to Matthew's prophetic story of Jesus Christ – as he applies the finishing touch. – *Amen.*