

A Sermon Preached at St. Giles' Church, Jefferson, Maine
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2011
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"May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us." (Psalm 90.17)

Have you ever spoken with someone from a different culture – or read a book written long ago – and had this kind of experience? You are in a conversation, or reading along, and you think, "These people seem pretty much like us." Then something happens, or someone says something, and you suddenly realize: No, they are *not* "like us." Not quite.

That's what happens in today's gospel reading.

There are times when Jesus and the gospel writers seem to reach out across the centuries and speak directly to our hearts and minds, our deepest concerns, and our highest values. And there are other times when we suddenly see that they are from a very different time and place. Maybe no other passage in the gospels matches this one in putting those two perspectives right up against each other. And yet as we may see, they are both about love – God's love for us, our need for that love, and our love for God and one another.

In the first part of today's lesson, Jesus quotes two well-known statements from the Torah, the teaching of Moses. The entire "Torah and the Prophets," the sacred Scriptures of the Jews, could be summarized as loving God and loving our neighbors. We listen to this and, though it may be hard to put into practice, we know that it expresses deep values that we all share. But then Jesus – perhaps weary of continual challenges from his religious opponents, as we have heard in previous weeks – turns the tables on his questioners, and challenges them. "The Messiah, the Christ – whose son is he?" They answer, "David's son." Then Jesus springs his trap. Quoting Psalm 110 as representing the voice of David, he asks, "How can the messiah be David's son, if David himself calls him Lord?"

And we, like the opponents of Jesus, are stunned into silence – but not because we have no answer. We don't even understand the question.

Let's take it in pieces. First, what is this idea that "David by the Spirit" is speaking in the Psalms? It was, in fact, a belief shared by most Jews of the time: King David, divinely inspired, wrote the Psalms. Many of the Psalms mention David in their opening lines, and even though some of the Psalms name other authors – even though some of them obviously describe conditions from centuries after David's time – the Jewish people saw David as the author of all of the Psalms. Nowadays we don't agree with this. But though we don't accept the fact, we must not be too hasty in dismissing the idea. It is when the Bible seems difficult to understand that it may be offering us an insight that we need to hear. And this may be one of those times.

What could it mean to say that David wrote the Psalms? The Psalms contain and express the collective, prayerful wisdom of the Israelite people. They are models of worshipful awe, of thanksgiving, of anguished pain, of penitent humility. Saying that David is their author is equivalent to saying that David is the representative Israelite – the one who praises God, who offers thanks to God, who humbles himself before God, who confesses his deepest sin, acknowledges his darkest fear, cries out in his most dreadful pain. David stands in for every Israelite – in his power, but also in his weakness – in his accomplishments, but also in his shortcomings – in his love for God and passionate worship of God, but also in his times of faltering faith and tepid love. David is every Israelite – ultimately, David is all of us.

So, in the second part of the question – Why does David call the messiah "my Lord"? – we have a very rabbinic argument from Jesus. "Here," he says, in effect, "is a statement in the sacred writings. The great Israelite said it. What can that mean?" And then his opponents withdraw, and we never get the explanation.

What could that explanation be? "The messiah," "the son of David," must be greater than David – the offspring must be greater than the ancestor, exactly the opposite of what a devout Israelite

should think. But why?

Look again at the notion that David wrote the Psalms. And listen to the heading and some of the text from Psalm 51, the great prayer of penitence that we say, on our knees, on Ash Wednesday: "A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet had come to him after he had come to Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity Against you, you alone, have I sinned Deliver me from bloodshed, O God The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit."

The messiah was to come and save Israel. But if we take this Psalm seriously, and if we follow the practice of Jesus' time and hear David speaking it, one thing is obvious: David himself needs saving. He needs saving not only from his specific shortcomings, as we see in his adulterous liaison with Bathsheba – he needs saving also from his accomplishments, from his "bloodshed." Whether this is bloodshed that David commits, or bloodshed visited upon him, it means a deliverance from violence and success by conquest. The Jewish people had conquered, and they had been conquered. They did not need more salvation by conquest – they needed salvation *from* conquest.

Very well. But why put this in the terms that Jesus does? Why base this argument on David, and an obscure Psalm verse? For the answer we can look to another Psalm, 89, a great hymn of praise not for David himself, but praise for God's love of David. In it God says, "I will keep my love [for David] forever," and the worshiper later prays, "Where, Lord, are your loving kindnesses of old, which you promised David?" Ultimately, David is important not for what he has done, not because he is the king of Israel, but because God loves him. And if David stands in for all of God's people, the people Israel, those people – all of God's people, including us – matter because God loves us.

So why is the Messiah, "David's son," greater than David? Because David needs God's love just as much as any of us do. Jesus, the Messiah, is the human face of the love of God – and Jesus loves David, and all of us, and saves both us and him.

God loves, as the Old Testament lesson tells us, "face to face," as God knew Moses, the greatest prophet of Israel. God sends us "lovingkindness in the morning" to "make us glad" and "prosper the work of our hands," as our Psalm puts it. God's emissaries, including St. Paul in his ministry to the church in Thessalonika, are charged with the task of bringing that love to God's people: "so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us." And we recognize the love of God for us in Jesus. As John's gospel says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son"

When we love someone, and when someone loves us, we look into each other's faces. And this matters, because it is not by knowing about *things* that we are saved. We are not saved by our knowledge. We are saved – we are transformed into beings worth saving, into those who want to be saved – by love. We are loved into being better than we are. We – David, and all Israel, and all of us who are God's people – are transformed by the loving, yearning face of God: the God who comes to us as Jesus, whom we can know, who cares so much for us, who loves us so deeply, that God will not let us go until we are truly, completely the beloved ones that God means us to be. Amen.