

Underwhelmingly wonderful

This is not going to be academic. No exegesis – no history lesson.

This is Matthew's story – he is leading up to the climax. He finally proclaims Christ as King. And then Jesus weeps over Jerusalem¹ and descends to his destiny. The walk and wait to Christmas. And this is our story too.

Christ the king who rides a donkey instead of a fine steed. Christ the king that moves through the crowds and notices people: Short people, poor people, people of no consequence, foreigners, unclean, uncircumcised. Women, children, slaves – prosperous, instruments of power, holy...he treats them all the same.

No throne? No Chariot? No crown. Someone who listens and tells stories. Christ who now sits in judgement. Matthew puts on Jesus things that Jesus never proposed...because Matthew, like everyone wants a King to lead them out of misery.

But Jesus isn't promising prosperity in this life. He's not giving people access to new lands through conquest. In fact, he suggests things will get tougher for his followers. And suggests humility is a blessing. So how do we know he is King?

I was sad to hear Rabbi Jonathan Sacks passed away last week. Rev John Blair sent me a link to the announcement. Jonathan Sacks was a wonderful, wise, grounded theologian that was my go-to guy when I didn't understand something. He wrote about very complicated things simply, humbly and with great insight.

His article on humility was attached to the death notice. In it he talked about meeting a world-famous figure. The person was a leader of a fundamentalist Jewish sect that I have little time for, as did he, apparently. But let him tell his story....

"I was an anonymous student from three thousand miles away. Yet in his presence I seemed to be the most important person in the world. He asked me about myself; he listened carefully; he challenged me to become a leader, something I had never contemplated before. Quickly it became clear to me that he believed in me more than I believed in myself.

"As I left the room, it occurred to me that it had been full of my presence and his absence. Perhaps that is what *listening* is, considered as a religious act. I then knew that greatness is measured by what we efface ourselves towards. There was no

¹ Luke 19:41-42

grandeur in his manner; neither was there any false modesty. He was serene, dignified, majestic; a man of transcending humility who gathered you into his embrace and taught you to look up.”²

That is how I imagine Jesus. I imagine there is a comfort and serenity, a certainty that comes in knowing the Father – his mission: God on earth. Walk gently, wonder, be curious. God is learning the human condition *and* teaching the divine one. Luke said Jesus preached every day in the temple and the priests kept looking for ways to kill him ...”but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.”³

So how do we know he is King? Through the shards and prisms of these stories. What I see may not be what you see. To some it will be the mystery and miracles. Healing the sick, walking on water. To others it will be through metaphors like calming the water and feeding the 1000s. For some it is from the Baptism...and a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”. For others, the rebellious turning of tables; calling out traditions and laws that have nothing to do with God’s love.

In the Jewish tradition, there is no heaven and hell. There is no 2nd chance – life is not a rehearsal. What you do on earth matters because your legacy is all you get. Who you are, what kind of person you were, is *how* you are remembered. To be remembered well – is your reward. To be forgotten, your curse. That is why Jewish people name children after lost loved ones – not living ones. My son is called Sam after my grandfather and although they never met, Sam’s life has been shaped by his great grandfather’s stories. His character and virtues were built into him by the memories of others. You could say, my grandfather lives on in his name but also in his wisdom, kindness and the way he loves.

That is why Jesus humbly prays, “do this and remember me”.

So how do we know Jesus is King? For me, Paul’s letter in Acts 28:11-16 is another clue.

Paul’s been busted and he pleads to have his case heard in Rome. His petition was successful so he sets out on the long journey. At one stage, they were shipwrecked and had to set in on an island where, “There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them.”

² “What opens us to the world”: On the unfashionable virtue of humility
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

³ Luke 19:45-48

Eventually he got to Rome. ¹⁵” The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us.” The letter says that at the sight of these people, Paul thanked God and was encouraged”. People travelled for up to 3 days to see Paul. Paul was surprised to find so many people so far away were followers of Jesus.

Paul was confined in rented house with a single guard for 2 years. He welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!”

Paul finds Christians in far off places. It’s some 50 years after Jesus died and the word has spread. Jesus is remembered by strangers. My grandfather died about 56 years ago but even with all the amazing instant telecommunications available today – I doubt you’ve ever heard of him.

Yet the voice of Jesus travelled the oceans in the hearts of many and spread and spread *before* Paul.

I knew an amazing woman whose life changed literally overnight when she was robbed of her mobility. She was an active woman in her community and wound up in a hospital for months and months. None of the treatments worked but she never lost heart. Her faith was so strong – she kept saying to me, “I am just waiting for God to tell me what I am supposed to be doing”. And while she waited, she ministered to the nurses and patients. She brought joy and purpose to those around her, especially those who had lost hope. She cajoled people back to God by her actions – not her words. I watched in wonder. Awe.

Like Paul she talked about the kingdom of God while incarcerated.

Nearly 30 years ago, I sat praying in an empty Anglican church. I prayed for the strength I would need to see that day and probably the next decade through. I looked up from my prayers and through my tears I was shocked to see a tortured cruciform 20 foot high. Jesus twisted in pain. His face was sad. Jesus! I thought (loudly) you must have been scared witless (not exactly my words) and you went to Jerusalem anyway. My sacrifice seemed easy compared to His. I rose and faced life as it was.

To be honest, in the Middle East it is hard to tell the difference between the sheep and the goats and yes, there is an animal in between. In the Middle East, the sheep are scrawny, generally have flatter coats and are longer legged than the Merinos. Not at all like the cute lambs on the Christmas cards.

But it is obvious by what they do. Sheep are grazers. Sheep ramble slowly and eat short plants close to the ground. They are more settled and focussed on place... and

also more vulnerable. Goats are curious and move with agility. They look for leaves, vines and shrubs. They are forever nibbling at things. investigating everything ...and because of that, they are much more trouble than sheep. Goats look up and around. Sheep tend to gaze where they graze.

Uh-oh, I think I might be a goat.

So how do I tell the sheep from the goats? Well it's not my job, thankfully. But what I can tell you is over 2000 years ago a man walked the earth and changed us today, in this church – right now.

Jesus conquered the world with his love.

The miracle is that he dwells in us. I see his work in ordinary people.

And although we didn't read Ephesians (1:15-23) – I will finish with it now.

“For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

And God ... appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Amen.