



KIAMA ANGLICAN
CHURCHES

**Encounters in Ethics –
Questions & Answers**

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Introduction

The nature of this passage reminds me of an incident in Sydney almost 40 years ago. I was studying at Moore College in Newtown and, on Tuesday afternoons after school, I would take the boys, Norman and Stephen, to a pottery class at an arts centre buried in the back blocks of Glebe. This particular Tuesday we were crossing Parramatta Road from Missenden Road with the green light when all of a sudden the air was filled with sirens and then, very quickly, flashing blue and red lights. Four police motorcyclist arrived at the corner – one went to each of the points of the intersection and held up the traffic and immediately two more police motorcycles arrived escorting a white van travelling quickly down the wrong side of Parramatta Road; it wheeled into Missenden Road and up the little hill towards Prince Alfred Hospital followed by yet another two police motorcyclists. The original four motorcyclists then circled round the intersection and followed them.

The immediate reaction is, *What was that?* or perhaps, *Who was that?*

We never found out what it was all about.

Today's passage from Matthew begins, for some of the people of Jerusalem, with much the same question.

WHO IS THIS?

We never found out what the motorcade was all about but, aside from raising curiosity, it has made little difference to our lives. But the answer to the question in Matthew 21:10 is the fundamental answer Matthew is seeking to answer throughout all of his Gospel.

Who is this man? Jesus is... who?

Prayer

Gracious Lord, by your mercy, open our ears to hear your voice, and hearing you, to trust and obey. Remove the scales from our eyes and unveil for us the wonders of your Word; your glories are revealed there. Be our delight. Be our satisfaction. Awaken in us a new sense of expectancy. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Matthew 21:10-27

10 *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred...*

The passage opens with Matthew's narrative; the story - finally reaching Jerusalem... the acclaim... the palm waving... the donkey journey... the "Hosanna"s reach their climax and Jesus rides/walks into the City of David, Zion, Jerusalem.

And his arrival has its effect – it is a seismic event (the verb has that sort of force) – Jerusalem is filled with excited pilgrims and rumours of any sort of messianic figure would have some effect.

And some asked, "Who is this?"

WHO IS THIS?

Is the question on the lips of many in the city.

Of course, Jesus (John's gospel tell us) has been in Jerusalem before but not to such acclaim. And there are many pilgrims who may only have heard rumours of a new prophet and so they express their puzzlement. Who is this?

And this is the Question this passage and indeed the whole of Matthew's Gospel asks of his hearers and readers.

WHO IS THIS?

And that is the challenge to us today – who is this and what does he mean to me? Matthew challenges us to reflect on who Jesus is for us, today... and into our future. NOW!

Many of us here have heard many of the things about Jesus before, indeed over and over again. Can I say that that is a danger?! We say, "Ho hum... I know this!" and start thinking about what's for dinner... what's on TV... who will win the AGP today... or am I sure I locked the car etc.

BUT... we need as Christians to be constantly pushing out our understanding of Jesus - who he is and what he has done. Just like the shark that has to keep moving through the water to 'breathe' so we have to keep growing... walking as Christians. And especially as Easter approaches we should be prompted to push out our understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done.

Our passage today gives us some clues as to 'Who is this?'

11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

First, some of the crowd answered – possibly the pilgrims from Galilee coming to the festival of Passover along with so many others - he is...

Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee

Jesus – Joshua in Hebrew – means (as Matthew has reminded us in chapter 1) 'Yahweh saves'.

The Prophet – One who comes to speak from God

From Nazareth in Galilee – Basically from the sticks... the back blocks... the 'regions'... not part of the establishment.

All of course true but, in the end, not the whole story... a little inadequate.

So who is he? Who is this one who has actually been given a ROYAL welcome as he wound his way up the hill to Jerusalem. Let's let his words and actions in the next few verses inform us.

12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 “It is written,” he said to them, “ ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’ ”

The first action Matthew records is Jesus' 'cleansing' of the temple. Matthew wants us to consider it as just after Jesus enters Jerusalem and as a priority for Jesus. (Mark notes it as the next day)

The commercial activity which, while in itself is legitimate and necessary, is consuming the space that is meant to be the Court of the Gentiles where non-Jews could come to pray without the disruption of the hubbub of a 'market'. Jesus' rebuke includes the fact that some of the commercial activities are unjust and all of them interfere with the point of the temple... the focus of the temple... which is worship and prayer.

So... **WHO IS THIS?**

Jesus is the one who is the true temple, the true priest, indeed the God of the temple himself and he has come to Jerusalem to be the ultimate sacrifice; he rules and he will NOT tolerate those who cheapen the rightful worship of his Father. Jesus, the Messiah is staking his claim in the central shrine of his people.

Next...

14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.

Now the disadvantaged of society come to Jesus at the 'cleansed' temple and he heals them.

WHO IS THIS?

Jesus is the Healer / King... who pauses to bring healing (a token of the kingdom of God – his rule) to those who come seeking him rightly.

¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.

Jesus acts - he does wonderful things... he shows God's concern for right worship... he demonstrates God's concern for the weak and disadvantaged... and 'the chief priests and teachers of the law' (the Jerusalem establishment) are indignant.

They are wonderful things... but the Jewish establishment is indignant.

Good grief! Even the kids are calling out to him praises due to the Messianic King. (Hosanna is a call to God to act to save!).

It is not without its interest that they picked on the easiest target they could find — little children. They had no criticism of the unholy traders who defiled the sacred place, but they objected to the praises of children. Morris

¹⁶ “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise’?”

WHO IS THIS?

Jesus is THE one who is worthy of praise.

Psalms 8:2 From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

This Old Testament quotation had undisputed authority for his opponents and, note, it speaks of praise of God that the children apply to Jesus, so much so so that their accusations immediately lost all substance.

17 And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

Throughout Holy Week – the week before the original Easter (Passover) Jesus (and presumably his retinue) retired to Bethany (about 3kms or so away) for the evenings.

And now we come to the knotty ‘bit’ of this passage ...

18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered.

The event is quite clear! But... why?! What had the poor fig tree done? *Its leaves advertised that it was bearing, but the advertisement was false* - Carson

The first thing we need to consider is the context. It comes in the midst of Jesus' interactions in Jerusalem in his last earthly week on this planet. He has come to Jerusalem to die... but also to make clear what his message to the Jewish establishment was.

The previous incidents in the temple and the Jews' rejection of him is here reinforced as an acted parable – Israel is the fig tree (an image for Israel familiar in the Old Testament) it has not produced the expected fruit and so it comes under the judgement (the curse) of God... uncomfortable thought though it may be. God is amazingly patient, amazingly loving and amazingly gracious but those who consistently and stubbornly resist his love and grace will suffer the consequence of their rebellion – God's judgement.

When sin is committed, there will be either true repentance (which includes a desire to overcome that sin and never commit it again) or judgment.

20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked.

21 Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

Firstly Jesus is demonstrating the perfect faith of the Messiah – he is explaining in the first place his own actions.

Second this shows that, as we trust in Jesus (have faith), God answers our prayers.

The example is, I suspect, hyperbole – exaggeration to make a point. This is simply a metaphor for accomplishing great things.

WHO IS THIS?

Jesus is the herald of judgement to those who persist in their rejection God’s grace. Jesus is the fountain of grace and faith in him can ‘move mountains’.

23 Jesus entered the temple courts and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

The Jewish authorities... the powers that be... have another ‘go’ - a ‘cheap shot’ at Jesus. Their question is not legitimate; the answer is absolutely obvious - even the ‘children and infants’ of v16 recognise it.

They want to trap Jesus into something that they can twist into a charge of blasphemy.

24 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"

But Jesus has a question of his own; it too is a question of authority - the authority of John the Baptist. Jesus mentions baptism but he means the whole of John's ministry of prophecy, challenge and teaching as well as the physical act of baptism.

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'

²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

Their reasoning is clear and correct – they are in a bind... their trickiness has been out 'tricky-ed'

27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

So they chicken out, claiming ignorance, for again the answer is as plain as the nose on their faces – John's baptism is from heaven

Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Jesus says, in effect 'Work it out for yourselves'. And, as we said before, the answer is clear. And will be made even clearer (for those who have ears to hear) in the couple of parables that follow this passage. But you will have to wait a couple of weeks before we come to those.

WHO IS THIS?

Jesus is God's Messiah... the one with God's authority who comes both to bring blessing, healing and judgement. He is the ONE that John the Baptist announced as his herald. He is what he claims to be. Jesus is God's Messiah - the one with God's authority... Emmanuel – God with us. Jesus is the king riding humbly on a donkey to his throne, which is the cross.

WHO IS THIS?

He enters Jerusalem as the King, not to establish the monarchy but to bring peace between God and humanity, and among humans, through his own death.

He clears the temple, not simply to restore the institutional and ethical integrity of the priestly order but to announce that he is the Priest who will offer the final sacrifice that will make open and permanent the access of all humans to God.

He pronounces judgment on Israel like the prophets of old, not simply to restore order but to function as the Prophet who has fulfilled the Old Testament to enable his nation of disciples to live kingdom-empowered lives as his witnesses during this age.

The disciples will later proclaim:

Acts 2:36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

Conclusion

WHO IS THIS?

Is he, as Steve Stanis reminded us in C.S. Lewis' terms, Liar, Lunatic or Lord? The passage says Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and King.

So what are you going to do about it? If you are not yet a follower of this Jesus then you need to consider here his claims and understand the consequences of your decisions.

Commitment to Jesus leads to life in his Kingdom. Continued 'rejection' leads to judgment and death.

If you are a follower of Jesus but a bit halfhearted not fully committed, you need to look again to Jesus and see again, as we approach Easter, what he has done. And every one of us ought to do this!

If you are a committed follower of Jesus, then learn again how great and wonderful he is. Keep on pushing out your understanding of him, of his preexistence, his incarnation, his birth his perfect life, his death, resurrection and ascension, and his current rule from heaven.

So, as we enter the final week of this Easter season let us note these words from J.I. Packer:

We who believe are called to understand this and to show ourselves his people by obeying him as our king, trusting him as our priest, and learning from him as our prophet and teacher. To center on Jesus Christ in this way is the hallmark of authentic Christianity. J.I. Packer

PRAY

Gracious God, we thank you that you have revealed your Son to us, that Jesus is the Christ, the deliverer of we all need.

Please give us the grace we need to follow you.

You alone are worthy and we want to give you our lives, but need your help to do so.

In Christ's Name, Amen.