

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 18 – October 8, 2023
Matthew 22:34-46 – The Day of Questions
Rev. Peter Wagner

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

On Palm Sunday, five days before he went to the cross, the king of Israel entered Jerusalem, riding in lowly triumph on a donkey. He entered to shouts of, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" And later that same day, after he entered the temple and drove out the moneychangers, he healed the blind and the lame. But the priests and leaders were outraged.

The next day, Monday of Holy Week, is known as the Day of Questions. Because just four days before he went to the cross, as Jesus was teaching in the temple, the chief priests and leaders tested him with question after question. They started by challenging his authority. "By what authority are you doing these things," they asked, "And who gave you this authority?" For the Jewish teachers of the law could only interpret Moses, but Jesus taught as one who had authority. He taught as if he were at least as great as Moses. He spoke God's word directly. And Moses had written in Deuteronomy 18 that a prophet like him would one day arise, to speak with divine authority. And now the people were hanging onto the words of Jesus as if he were that great prophet like Moses. But as for the unbelieving leaders, why should Jesus have to defend his authority to them? His mighty words and miracles bore witness that he carried the authority of God.

So on the Day of Questions, Jesus answered them with a question of his own. "I also will ask you one question," he said, "And if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" His interrogators were trapped. They could not say "From heaven," because then he would say, "Why then did you not believe him?" And they could not say, "From man," because they were afraid of the crowd, who thought John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

So began the Day of Questions, a day recorded in detail in Matthew 21 and 22. And throughout that day, Jesus never explicitly said who he was. But pay attention to how he revealed the truth by what he said and what he asked.

After that first confrontation, Jesus told three parables against the leaders, including the parable of the tenants. A master leased his vineyard to tenants, but when the time came for harvesting the fruit, the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. At last the man sent his son, but when the tenants saw the son, they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

And since it was the Day of Questions, Jesus brought home the point of his parable by a question. He let the Pharisees condemn themselves with their own lips. He asked, "When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants." And he responded, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits." No wonder they sought to kill him.

In response, the Pharisees began to plot how to trap him by his words. Could this man who thought he was greater than Moses walk the tightrope between the demands of the law of Moses and the laws of Rome? So on the Day of Questions, they asked him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Shouldn't we give our money to God? But Jesus, aware of their malice, asked another question of his own: Who's image and inscription are on coins for the tax? And they said, "Caesar's," And he said, "Therefore render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

With the Pharisees defeated, the Sadducees took their chance. The Sadducees say there is no resurrection, so they came to Jesus with a weird hypothetical question designed to show that the resurrection of the dead contradicts the law of Moses. Because Moses commanded the brother of a man who dies without children to marry his dead brother's wife and produce an heir. But what if a woman were married to seven brothers in this life? To whom would she be married after the resurrection? Jesus answered with authority. "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

They were astonished because he spoke with authority even greater than Moses. For Moses never explained these words. Moses never said that “I am the God of Abraham” means Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive now with God. Moses never saw these patriarchs. But Jesus spoke as if he had seen the patriarchs in heaven himself!

So now we finally come to the gospel reading for today, the climax of the Day of Questions. When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered again. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him another question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

This sounds like a simple, innocent question. Not dripping with malice like the ones before it. But really, it was a trap just like the rest. For every Jewish child knew the greatest commandment, and every confirmation student knows it today. The greatest commandment was clearly taught by Moses in Deuteronomy 6, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” What the Pharisees were really asking was, “Who do you think you are Jesus? If you are so much greater than Moses, can you explain the law to us any better than he did?” Another gotcha question.

And for a moment, it seemed like Jesus really was trapped. For when he answered, he simply quoted Deuteronomy 6. You can imagine the Pharisees chuckling to themselves. “We’ve got him now! He isn’t as great as Moses, he can’t say anything better about the law than Moses. He can only quote what Moses said.”

But Jesus knew their thoughts. And he would have the last word, he would ask the last question. For he knew that every single question that day had been focused on the law. Law questions like: Do you have authority to speak like Moses? Can you really tell us we are hypocrites who don’t obey the law? Can you distinguish between the laws of Moses and Caesar? Can you reconcile the law of Moses with the resurrection? Can you explain the greatest commandment?

These are all law questions. But Jesus came to fulfill the law, and also to establish something greater. The gospel. We only love God with all our heart because he loved us first. So with his last question, Jesus turned their focus to the gospel. “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” And the Pharisees, knowing how God promised in 2 Samuel 7 that the Messiah would come from the line of David, answered correctly, “The son of David.”

But already they were uneasy. Only yesterday the whole city was rejoicing and praising Jesus, shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” And now, they had to admit that the Christ would be the Son of David. They had to admit that the people were calling Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed eternal king, who would sit on David’s throne forever.

And to say that Christ is the Son of David is true, but incomplete. The Pharisees should have known from the Scriptures that the Messiah would not only be human, but divine. So Jesus showed them the truth by asking a final follow-up question. A question about David’s words in Psalm 110. “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, “‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

So now, today, as you sit in the pew, let this final question of Jesus be his question for you. “What do you think about the Christ?” This is the greatest question of your life. It drives far deeper than any question about the law. It reveals who Jesus is. It reveals the gospel, and God’s great love for you. For Jesus is more than a lawgiver, more than the Son of David. He is the Savior, the Son of God.

The fact that Jesus is God is the fundamental truth of the Christian religion. Yet most of the world denies it. Atheists deny it, of course. But so do all unbelievers, secularists, and false religions. Jews deny that Jesus is God, and so do Muslims. Also Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarians, and many other sects. And since they all reject Jesus as God, they are all like the Pharisees and scribes. They will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

But what about you? What do you think about the Christ? Today you must answer Jesus’ question by faith, not like the Pharisees. You must confess him as Lord. Confess with Simon Peter in Matthew 16, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” For he is your king, David’s Son and David’s Lord, God and man joined in one person. Confess with Thomas when he put his hands into the risen Savior’s side, “My Lord and my God!”

For your Lord Jesus Christ, true God, begotten from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is the God of Abraham. He is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome God of the Old Testament, who executes justice for the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner. All your worship and fear and love and service belong to him. For he is your praise.

And he is your God, who loved you and gave himself for you. In his love, he became your brother, a man like you, born of the virgin Mary to share your sufferings, tempted in every way as you are to save you from your sins. And you know that just four days later, four days after the Day of Questions, Jesus of Nazareth, your God, was lifted up on the cross for you, to purchase your salvation by his blood. In his great love, he died and rose to raise you from the dead and bring you into the kingdom of heaven. He is the God of the living.

And his salvation is far greater than the salvation of Moses. For he saves you not by demanding obedience to the law, but by a free gift, by grace through faith. So believe in him, your Lord and your God. Sing hosanna to the Son of David. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.