

## LOVE AND LORDSHIP

### Matthew 22.34-46

#### **Introduction**

In 2004, after the Madrid bombings the perpetrators declared their repudiation of a pluralist secular worldview and their commitment to an alternative with the slogan: “you love life, we love death.” This privileging of death rejects absolutely any commitment to life. It adores and serves death, whether it be the slayer’s or the slain. To love death is to say it is beautiful to receive it and to risk it. The beautiful and holy love is to distribute it.

Last week I suggested that Jesus’ response to the Sadducees concerning the resurrection means that God refuses to abandon us to death. Death is subject to the risen Christ and we by gift share in that subjection. Death is the old enemy, and its power must be resisted.

In today’s reading Jesus continues that debate and by Matthew’s joining of these stories together we explore what the alternative to the cult of death is.

#### **Context**

The hostility continues. A lawyer asks a hostile question to test Jesus just like the satan did. One way of doing that is to pose a riddle.

Jewish teachers often sought to distinguish between light and heavy commandments. Some argued that the command to honour parents was the greatest, but always Jewish teachers stressed loving God with one’s whole being. And love of neighbor had long been a fundamental principle of Jewish life.

But the question put to Jesus is not simply a classroom question. It is a form of entrapment. They want to show the crowd that he is a teacher with no authority and thus illegitimate.

### **The greatest commandment in the law**

Jesus' contribution to this debate is not original but it is distinctive. It is distinctive in the way he combines the two elements into a new whole. And it is that that has been central ever since, from the apostles to the present day. The answer has determined the shape of Christianity.

So Jesus responds to the hostility with scripture, Deut 6.4-5

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is your God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."*

Remember this command is part of a story. It does not come out of the clouds. It presumes God's love of Israel experienced in the stories of the patriarchs and the Exodus. It flows from God's love in his call to them to be his people, his promises to them, and his powerful redemption of them from the hand of the Pharaoh.

For Mt this love is the character of God expressed supremely in the story of Jesus. That story gives full meaning to the OT term covenant love or steadfast love that the story of Israel and her prophets has been pointing to. It is a concrete love that cares to the heights and depths of a cross.

In last week's debate concerning the resurrection I suggested that resurrection names God's refusal to abandon us to death. This is the penetrating depths of the cross that display the nature of God and thus the nature of the love of God. Even the life of those who have declared themselves enemies is precious.

This love can, of course, be harsh and dreadful too, because being loved by God is to be forced to know ourselves truthfully. Love is deeply revealing. If love penetrates death to give life we must expect that love will expose our life as it truly is.

And it is Jesus' next step that exposes the human heart as he turns to Lev 19.18 and adds:

*"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people , but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."*

Jesus doesn't quote the whole verse or indeed much of the chapter 19 which details what love of neighbour meant in the law. In that chapter the law enjoins the Israelite community not to steal, deal falsely, defraud, revile the deaf, trip up the blind, or render unjust judgment. That is how love of neighbour was meant to work in Israel.

And the root is "I am the Lord;" the character of the God of covenant love.

Jesus takes us one step further into the character of God and describes in 5.21-48 what loving the neighbour means. He makes a radical proposal; you are to love your enemies. Here the human heart is exposed to searching blinding painful light. Our self-centredness is exposed and overwhelmed.

We are to love our neighbor as ourselves and that is not a psychological statement but a theological one with psychological ramifications. We are to love ourselves as God has loved us. As John once wrote:

*"Beloved, since God has loved us so much, we also ought to love another." 1John 4.11*

God loved us while we were still his enemies (Ro. 5.10), opposed to his agenda and spurning his desire for loving fellowship with us. We love ourselves when like God we love our enemies.

Loving God then is central to any other activity we may call love. We have become used to disengaging these two elements of love but Mt puts them on same plane; you cannot have one without the other.

That goes against the grain but its power is this; we cannot fill the word love with any meaning we want as we do in modern society; we can love anything from burgers to Bach. But in the light of God's love for us we cannot place any restrictions on love using the standard of what we find preferable. We are stuck with the God who sends Jesus and will not abandon us to death. That is the source of our life and our pattern of love.

And on what authority does Jesus teach such things? Remember the question posed right at the beginning of this tussle with the authorities?

*“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” 21.23*

The question has remained unanswered. So now the Lord of life puts **his question** to the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians, to the representatives of Caesar.

### **What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he? (42)**

And what an obscure question it seems to us. And indeed the exchange that follows sounds mightily strange to our ears. And so it might, as it is an entirely strange form of argument to us.

Matthew uses this debate to bring out what is central to his understanding of Jesus and his relation to God and Caesar.

In this debate Jesus puts the question and the Pharisees come up with a traditional and popular answer that has already been used in this story: “The son of David.” That is, he is a king.

Jesus then presses that answer with a reference to scripture, Ps 110.

*“How is it then that David by 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’”?*

Ps 110 was well known in the synagogue and much used in early Christianity. This is a challenge of biblical interpretation and in Jesus’ time the response is electric.

The question Jesus poses,

*“If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”*

becomes the question that is put to all generations of readers and hearers that follow. The only answer is that Messiah is David’s Lord and rules as God’s appointment. This proposes a change in in the most basic orientation of our lives. Messiah Jesus rules.

It says that the Lord of life and his kingdom of love is the future. He rules now according to Ps 110. No wonder the questioning comes to an end. The conclusion is too alarming for the death cult of Caesar. People turning to life and love and challenging the ultimate earthly power of death by which Caesar holds all in thrall is too much.

The attempt to destroy Jesus’ authority as a teacher by asking questions designed to entrap him has failed. That failure has created fear among the ruling elites and they will intensify their power to destroy him. He must fall victim to the lovers of death.

## Conclusion

The four questions, Caesar and taxes, the resurrection, the great command and Jesus question about authority, begin the formulation of a new way. This way refuses the privileging of death in a formulation like, “You love life, we love death.”

Instead it privileges the love that God shows us that flows to enemies and it privileges the life that God pours out in resurrection. Both of those outpourings find their pinnacle in Jesus the Lord Messiah.

What this requires from us is not some commitment to a code of ethics in any modern sense but a cataclysmic conversion to a new empire, a new world where we see ourselves differently in the light of God’s love and life, reach out to others in the way of God’s love and life and most potently challenge the death cult of Caesar at all levels of societal life.

That I call the beginnings of a radical personal and political theology.