

Our reading from Matthew this evening has two quite distinct sections. In the NRSV of the Bible, the first section carries the heading: *Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection*. The second section has the heading: *Jesus and the Temple Tax*. Let me comment on each section in order. In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is reported as predicting his death three times. The first prediction in Matthew comes after Jesus asks the disciples who do you say I am? Peter says you are the Messiah. The second prediction is the one we heard read this evening. It comes not long after the Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appear and God says in a voice from heaven *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!* His final prediction in Matthew, comes as he and the disciples are headed towards Jerusalem: *Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and on the third day he will be raised.*

It is important to note that in the Hebrew Scriptures there is no notion of the Messiah who will be executed and rise again. In Isaiah 53 there is the mention of a “Suffering Servant”. In Hosea, chapter 6 verse 2: *He will revive us after two days; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.* That clearly refers to a rising again for us not for the Messiah. In Psalm 16: 10 *You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your faithful servant see decay.* Again a statement more with reference to us than to the Messiah.

The complete silence in the Hebrew Scriptures on the death and resurrection of the Messiah has led some Christian scholars to regard Jesus as a proleptic or predicting Messiah who came into the world to bring gentiles into covenant with the God of Israel, so that in concert with the Jews we might await the second coming for us and the first appearance of the Messiah for them. It is also worthy of note that the followers of Islam also expect the return of Jesus to initiate a Messianic age of peace. It is consistent with references to the Messiah in the Hebrew scriptures that the Messiah’s arrival will bring all humankind into covenant with the God of Israel. For us, it is clear that we are in covenant with God through the incarnation of the Word in Jesus, and the life, death, and resurrection of that incarnate Jesus.

The other point worthy of your attention is Jesus referring to himself as the Son of Man. It is the title Jesus used most often about himself. Unlike references to death and resurrection, Son of Man does have a connection to the Hebrew Scriptures. Daniel, Chapter 7, verse 13 – 14 reads: *I saw one like a human being[e] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.* In the English language, Orthodox Jewish Bible, the term for human being is expressed in Aramaic as Bar Anosh literally the Son of Man. It was so expressed in many earlier

editions of the Christian Bible. I suspect modern translators into English use “like a human-being” to emphasize that the incarnate Jesus is both fully God and fully human. But be clear, right out of Daniel is the term Jesus uses to describe himself. Also be very clear those who heard him refer to himself as the Bar Anosh would have well known the connection to Daniel. It is worth realizing that the Son of Man would have been a name of hope to some, and an outrage and blasphemy to others.

Now to the second part of our reading, which is not quite so much of change from the first part as would seem apparent on first reading. First of all the question about the Temple Tax is one more question in which those who are outraged at Jesus’ adoption of the identity the Son of Man are attempting to trap him. Jesus takes the opportunity to clearly assert that he is not only the Son of Man but he is also the Son of God. Sons of kings do not pay tax. But Jesus literally and figuratively realizes that there are bigger fish to fry. So he provides Peter a way to pay the tax from the mouth of a fish.

Again the meaning of the fish is lost in translation. The Greek word for fish is ichthys. But key is the letters that make up the word. I is the first letter of Jesus in Greek. Ch is the first two letters of the Christ, th stand for Theo meaning of God, Y is for yios the son, and s is for Soter or saviour. So the coin to pay the tax and to avoid the fight that is not worth it comes from the mouth of the creature whose name bespeaks the Christos, the Saviour, the Son of God. That is why the small amount of fish are pivotal ingredients in both the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000. That is also why the fish is such a potent Christian symbol.

Heaven knows that Tyndal and Coverdale and others who in the 15th century, against great opposition, championed the translation of the Bible into the vernacular accomplished much. But on the downside, it has deprived us of multiple metaphors which in the Aramaic and the Greek are powerful. More powerful than we can articulate in any amount of literal language. As disconnected as the two sections of our reading this evening appear on first examination, together they express the complete nature of Jesus – fully God and fully human – Son of Man and Son of God.

What does it mean for us today? Only this, if we make the sacrifices to follow Jesus the world will be a better place and, no matter how much it may cost us, there will be a better way for all creation. And while truly following Jesus contains no room for selfishness or self-absorption only in following Jesus will we find a way to our own salvation, because as Anglicans we believe that personal salvation is entirely bound up in saving society. Salvation is a collective phenomenon. That is what we mean when we say the Shema. Love God, Love neighbour. One cannot do the first without doing the second. There is no division. That is the promise of the Messiah whether the saving grace of God is to come to us for a first or a second time. Amen