

This Nativity season we have been focusing on what Christmas IS rather than what it IS NOT. We have been examining the Scriptures, and the teachings of the Church regarding the true meaning of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To do that we have been taking a long look at the word “Immanuel” “God with us”. Last week we looked at the “With Us” part of that wonderful Name. When we speak of His human nature, we believe that our Lord is indeed the “Son of David” or as He so often referred to Himself, the “Son of Man.” We proclaim this every time we recite the Nicene Creed. He it was: “Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”

In many ways, that is the easier part of our discussion.

Almost everyone believes that Jesus Christ was an actual, historical figure who lived some two-thousand years ago.

\* Christians believe that if He was not truly a man “Come in the flesh”, we have no hope of salvation. Some two-thousand years ago, St John the Evangelist wrote: “By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.” (I John 4)

\* Muslims believe that He was a great prophet.

\* Jews believe that He was a false, or at least a badly misunderstood prophet.

\* Even atheists are ready to affirm that there must have been a historical Jesus of Nazareth. They may want to deny just about every other claim the Gospel writers make about Him, but although I'm sure there are people out there who deny He ever existed, I have never encountered one.

This means that if we were to stop there, if we were willing to stop with the "With Us" part of that name "Immanuel" we would make almost everyone happy. Hardly anyone would be offended or take issue with us. Even the most politically correct amongst us would be able to breathe easier, knowing that Christians don't believe anything different about Him than anyone else! Why can't we just leave it there?

### **Whose Son is He?**

For starters, our Lord DIDN'T leave it there.

I'm afraid the P.C. police of today would be quite upset with Him. As a matter of fact, the Pharisees - the P.C. police of the First Century WERE very upset with Him for not leaving it there. They were so upset that they would eventually establish a sham trial and sentence Him to death for what He said. (Someone once pointed out that very often, "the most intolerant and narrow-minded people

are the ones who congratulate themselves on their tolerance and open-mindedness.”)

I would like to start today with another passage in the New Testament that not only helps us take the next step, it takes it for us. And it comes straight from our Lord Himself.

The passage is found in the twenty second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In this passage, our Lord has been debating with the Pharisees in Jerusalem – this happened soon before His crucifixion.

The Saducees and the Pharisees had been disputing with Him. Without exception, they had lost every battle. They had been throwing questions out to Him left and right, looking for something that would trip Him up, thereby causing Him public humiliation.

It didn't work!

They finally ran out of questions and an awkward silence ensued. To borrow a line from an old John Wayne Western:

“The conversation sort of dried up!”

Moving from defense to offense, Our Lord now asked them a simple, yet terribly disconcerting question that left them speechless. Literally! Not one of them dared to say a word.

In Matthew 22:41 we read that *“While the Pharisees were [still] gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, “What do you think about the Christ (Messiah)? Whose Son is He?”*

Their answer takes us where we left off last week: *“They said to Him, “The Son of David.”*

So far, so good. Lots of people believed that. But our Lord was about to take it up a few notches.

His next question to them was, *“How then does David in the Spirit call Him “Lord,” saying: “The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool”? If David then calls Him ‘Lord’, how is He his Son? And no one was able to answer Him a word.”*

Checkmate!

Today we might ask, “what about that question was so baffling?” Surely someone could have come up with something! But in fact, they didn’t. And they didn’t, because they couldn’t. And they couldn’t for two possible reasons – one worse than the other.

\* Either they really didn’t know the answer and were stumped (which is pretty hard to believe), or,

\* They DID know the answer, but didn’t want to admit it because doing so would have put them in a very awkward position. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, it would have put

them in even a MORE awkward position than they were already in.

The multitudes believed in Him and asked: “When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this *Man* has done?” (John 7). (Great question!).

Even the Pharisees hotly disputed this point amongst themselves on several occasions. They were baffled by the power He exhibited. But they were terrified by the implications of that power. In John 11 We read that: “. . . the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”

One way or the other, things got very quiet when our Lord asked that question. You could have heard a pin drop – or maybe a needle through whose eye the camel could never pass. Not only did silence reign supreme, we read: “Nor from that day on did ANYONE dare question Him anymore.”

Like I said. The conversation sort of dried up!

### **My Lord**

So . . . since the Pharisees couldn't – or didn't want to answer Him, we will help them out. Let's look at the Psalm He quoted.

Everyone understood (and understands) that Psalm 109/110 is a tremendously powerful Messianic Psalm. The first line of that

Psalm is quoted in the New Testament more than any other single Old Testament verse. It was beloved by the Pharisees as well. They had no argument with our Lord's referring to it in regard to the coming Messiah. They did too!

Where they did take exception was in the thought that this coming Messiah would be more than simply a holy man coming down from the lineage of David.

He was that, to be sure. But the fact that King David, the author of this Psalm, refers to this Messiah as "My Lord", meant that it obviously didn't stop there. Something more was going on here. Something beyond human comprehension. Let's look more closely.

Since David is the one speaking in this Psalm, he is the one who says "The Lord" (God) "says to My (King David's) Lord, sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." King David was a great King whose power and authority were unquestioned. This great king would never have referred to his biological son, or even less some distant ancestral son as "My Lord". No one on earth stood before him in might and power. No earthly figure was greater than him. His dominion was pre-eminent. Yet that's exactly what he says. "The Lord said to My Lord.

Who was he referring to?

That is the question that so troubled the Pharisees in this passage. If the coming Messiah was only a man, no matter how mighty and powerful, He couldn't be God. But if He were only a man, King David would not have called Him "My Lord." But he did – right there in black and white! It can only mean one thing. The Messiah is also "Adonai" "GOD". There simply was no way out of it. But how could this be? They couldn't, or wouldn't accept this obvious conclusion.

### **El is for "Elohim"**

Let's go back to our word "Immanuel" for a moment. It will help clarify things a bit.

The "El" in Immanuel is a very common abbreviation for "Elohim" one of the holy names of God in the Bible. It is first used . . .well in the very first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning, God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth." After that noble beginning, it is used over 2,500 times in the Old Testament alone.

Even though it may not have been fully understood at the time of the New Testament, the word Immanuel was to be found in Isaiah 7:14 (Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name **Immanuel.**"). There were other passages in the Old Testament that should at the very least, have caused them to consider things much more carefully than they had.

If they had, it might have helped answer the questions they themselves were struggling with as to how it was that our Lord was able to:

\* Say the things He was able to say, “And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing *Him* were astonished, saying, “Where *did* this Man *get* these things? And what wisdom *is* this which is given to Him” (Mark 6:2).

\* Perform the mighty works He performed. (“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs.” John 11:47).

As the saying goes: “Please don’t confuse me with the facts!” Placed alongside the information provided in the Old Testament, the miraculous words, works, and deeds in the life of Christ on earth, might just have gradually began to come into focus. The facts would have spoken for themselves.

Maybe that’s what they were afraid of.

In fact, only in this light can we understand how he:

Stilled the waves and calmed the storm

Turned water into wine.

Walked on water

Healed the blind, the lame, the lepers, the infirm

Raised the dead to life

And in this light also, His dramatic words come into focus:

My son your sins are forgiven.

I am the Light of the World

Before Abraham was I AM.

### **Before the Morning Star**

Before we leave Psalm 109/110, let's examine one other (there are many) important aspect of the coming Messiah that is found there.

The Septuagint translation of this Psalm – the version accepted by the early Christian Church and commented upon by the early Fathers – includes the following translation of verse three: “From the womb before the Morning Star have I begotten Thee”. Our St. James choir has been practicing that line recently, since it is the prokeimenon sung before the Orthros Gospel reading for Nativity.

Commenting on that verse, St. Ambrose writes: “We read that the Son is begotten, inasmuch as the Father says, ‘I brought you forth from the womb before the morning star.’ We read of the ‘firstborn’ Son, of the ‘only-begotten’—firstborn, because there is none before him; only-begotten, because there is none after him.”

In his work: “On the Incarnation” Saint Athanasius says the following concerning the eternal nature of the Christ: “He it is Whose earthly lineage cannot be declared, because He alone

derives His body from no human father, but from a virgin alone. We can trace the paternal descent of David and Moses and of all the patriarchs. But with the Savior we cannot do so, for it was He Himself Who caused the star to announce His bodily birth.”

In His earthly nature, we can trace our Lord’s lineage back to David and beyond. We will be encountering this next week as we hear the genealogy passage from St. Matthew. But in regards to His Divine Nature, things change dramatically. Ancestry.com can’t help us here!

In His divine nature, the Eternal Word is “Begotten of the Father before all time” as we recite in the creed. Every Sunday School student knows the verse: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only BEGOTTEN Son.” This title is found four times in the Gospel of St. John, and several more times in his epistles. In Hebrews 1:5 we read: “For to which of the angels did He ever say: ‘You are My Son, Today I have **begotten** You’? And again: ‘I will be to Him a Father, And He shall be to Me a Son’?”

To quote Bishop Kallistos Ware: “The Church believes that Christ underwent two births, the one eternal, the other at a particular point in time: He was born of the Father ‘before all ages’, and born of the Virgin Mary in the days of Herod, King of Judaea, and of Augustus, Emperor of Rome. The distinctive characteristic of the second person is Sonship: although equal to the Father and

coeternal with Him, He is not unbegotten or sourceless, but has His source and origin in the Father, from whom He is begotten or born from all eternity – ‘before all ages’, as the Creed says.” (The Orthodox Church.)

**Conclusion:**

Our Lord was indeed the “Son of David”, and the “Son of Man.” His earthly Body was real, physical, and like as to our own in every way except sin. But He is more than that. He is also the Eternal God – begotten of the Father before all time. As such, He has another title: He is the “Son of God.” This title is found about 30 times in the New Testament. Every one of them is important.

The unclean spirits understood this – and during His earthly ministry ONLY used this title when they were speaking to Him directly. (In Luke 4:41, we read that our Lord commanded them to be silent when they said that, since they “knew that He was the Christ”.

The Pharisees called Him that on a few occasions, but in their case, it was ONLY used in negative terms. “IF you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

The Roman Centurion watching that same crucifixion had a much more informed response. He said: “Surely this man WAS the Son of God!”

**Who do YOU say that I am?**

At one point in His earthly ministry, Our Lord asked His disciples: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” They gave Him various answers. John the Baptist, a prophet, etc. At His next question, the angels and all creation held their breath.

“But who do YOU say that I am?” It was a bold question. Had His disciples grasped the reality of His being? Did they, too, see Him as simply a man – a “Son of David”? Was their perception beginning to mature as they witnessed the miraculous works He performed, and heard the powerful witness He bore?

The ongoing proclamation of the Gospel would soon rest on the shoulders of these disciples, and on the Church He was to establish through them. This was a critical moment.

Not surprisingly, St. Peter had the courage to step up boldly and to answer on behalf of himself, and of all the disciples – and for all of Christendom as well. He said: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Those who deny the divinity of our Lord and who say He never claimed to be the Eternal God, need to listen carefully to His answer. If Peter’s response was the wrong one, without a doubt our Lord would have stopped him in his tracks, rebuked him, and set the record straight once and for all. He didn’t. In fact His response to St. Peter is not a rebuke, but a blessings. “Blessed are you,

Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16).

I believe this morning that our Lord asks the same question to each one of us. “Who do YOU say that I am?” He is not interested in hearing us tell what the Church teaches, or what our peers, parents, or friends might think or want us to say. His question is to each of us personally. When we recite the Nicene Creed together, it is one of the few times we say: “I believe”. Belief is personal – it is a matter between us and God alone.

Is He merely a historical figure, long since vanished from the world scene.

Is He a prophet or wise man who spoke eloquent yet highly outdated words worthy of meditation and consideration?

Is He the baby Jesus from our Nativity scene at home, ready to be packed away and forgotten in a plastic box till next year along with all of the other sentimental ornaments and memories?

Or is He, as Simon Peter proclaimed, the eternal and preexisting God of the ages, existing in the form of God, In the beginning was the word, etc. Is He “The Christ, the Son of the Living God” to us? Are we ready to acknowledge Him as Lord and King in our lives?

As He asked His disciples two-thousand years ago: He asks us today: “Who do YOU say that I am.”

