

The Hinge between the Old Testament and the New

Matthew 22:34-46

Sermon by Silvia Purdie, for 22 October 2017

Two little stories today, from Matthew 22

I am suggesting today that these few verses form the hinge between the Old Testament and the New, between Judaism and Christianity. They express in the simplest of ways both the continuity and the discontinuity between Jesus and the Old Testament.

Two questions, two answers and a big challenge

First, the question to Jesus by a duly selected, and very brave, teacher of the law, a Pharisee. Simple enough. It's like a game show question, the money or the bag ... if you had to pick just one commandment of the law to be the greatest one, which would it be? It's a legal trap, because the obvious answer is that no commandment is any greater than any other – to pick one that matters most is to imply that all the rest matter less.

Jesus somehow manages to get away with picking not one but two verses in the Old Testament which he claims are together the greatest commandment.

It's a bit like what my husband always says when he orders carrot cake at a café and the nice girl asks him if he wants cream or yogurt with that and he says quite emphatically "YES!"

Sometimes he even gets away with it and gets both cream and yogurt. Normally though - despite his cheeky smile, and habit of reading waitresses' name tags and calling them by name - normally though my husband has to choose.

Jesus chooses two verses in the Old Testament, not just one, and declares that together the two verses are the foundation of all the rest, all the Law and the Prophets, Jesus says, depend on, rely on, are based on, these two. And what are they? I'm sure you know them. But you might not know where they come from. So let's look them up. First, Love the Lord your God. Not just in word but in heart, not just intellectually but in action, embodied in your life. And this is Jesus quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 5. I invite you to look it up.

and can we please have someone from down the back on the hall side of the church read it out .. Keep reading for a couple of verses. Deuteronomy 6 verses 5-7

In our conversations about children and youth ministry this is a central scripture. ... it flows immediately from the number one commandment – teach this to your children. Sharing faith with children and young people is not an optional extra, it is commandment of God.

Right, ready for number 2? Now we are turning to the previous book, Leviticus. Wow we're doing a tour of the Torah this month, with Numbers a couple of weeks ago, now Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Leviticus 19 verse 18. Can we have someone down here in front of the pulpit read this verse?

So, Jesus picks these two. And what is the central verb in each verse?

Love. No booby prize here. Same word. Same idea, hence why Jesus says that the second verse is like the first. the same idea is love. But what even is love? How is loving your neighbour, and loving yourself, a logical and necessary expression of loving God? Hopefully you've been hearing sermons on these questions for years so I'm going to leave them hanging in mid air. Point is, Jesus pulls together these two verses of the Old Testament and so lays them as the foundation for the Christian faith. So even if we find many of the other commandments of the Jewish law to not be relevant to our living we can't get away from these two. Or is it three? Love God, love others, love yourself. Pretty clever of Jesus – asked to pick the one greatest thing and he actually goes for a three-in-one! Quite trinitarian when you put it like that don't you think?

Right, on with the next story. Jesus has answered their question, now it's his turn and watch out! He asks them a big question: 'What's your understanding of the Messiah?' – that of course being very much a hot topic in Jewish circles in his day, and totally charged because the Pharisees knew very well that lots of people were saying that this Jesus was actually the Messiah so they must have been very nervous discussing this question directly with him. But Jesus doesn't even give them time to answer the first question before he heads them down into a trap of his own devising, right in to a thorny Biblical puzzle. So, he asks, whose son will the Messiah be?

"David" they answer, obviously the generally accepted answer. There are two sides to this answer. One, that a direct descendent of King David would be the Messiah and redeemer of Israel in the future. Second, that David through the Psalms prophesied about the Messiah. Many of the Psalms project King David's victory in his time forward into a future King whose kingdom would have no end. The Messiah was understood in the terms of David's poetry, the Psalms.

One of these prophetic messiah Psalms is number 110. So now we turn there. It is exactly in the middle of your Bible. The very middle chapter of the Bible is Psalm 117

Read Psalm 110 verse one and 2

OK, so what is this all about?

Have a read on through the Psalm.

The Psalmist is reporting a prophecy, as the first line says, God, 'The Lord Yahweh' is talking to someone that David describes as 'my lord'

discuss ... who is talking? to who? notice the changes in pronouns ... who is 'he' or 'you' or 'I'?

What is the Psalm saying to this king?

victory

over enemies

So what's the controversy with the Pharisees about? Jesus is pointing out to them that their own scriptures say quite clearly that someone greater than the heroes of old is coming, greater than King David even. In his argument based on the first verse of Psalm 110 Jesus points out that when King David has vision of a future Messiah, who would be both priest and King, David calls him 'my lord'

like John the Baptist saying to the people that one greater than I is coming.

I believe two things about what Jesus is doing here, and through all of his ministry. These are big things, really big and important and so of course really controversial.

first, I believe that Jesus did claim to be the Messiah, did believe that he was the Messiah (which in Greek is the word Christ). I believe that Jesus did claim that he was the fulfillment of the Jewish faith and scriptures. When Jesus read the Old Testament Jesus read them as being about himself.

This theological debate about a line from a Psalm is not for Jesus intellectual point-scoring. I believe that for Jesus it was personal. Jesus consciously knew and deliberately decided that the prophecies about the coming Messiah were about himself. Jesus spoke and acted fully self-consciously in the light of the Old Testament.

I mean, it sounds arrogant to us that he could claim to be the Son of God and the Messiah that all Israel was hoping for. But I believe that Jesus was just telling the truth, and living out of that truth. He knew that Psalm 110 was God's message and promise for him personally.

So, firstly, Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, in continuity with the Old Testament hopes for a coming king.

Second comes the huge 'but', Yes, BUT Jesus at the same time completely undermined Jewish hopes for the coming king. Jesus consciously knew and deliberately decided to be the Messiah, the Christ, in a way that was not at all like the Old Testament pictured it. Isaiah had a glimpse closer into Jesus' path, in Isaiah's extraordinary prophecy about the suffering servant. But most of the hopes of the Old Testament are about a victorious Messiah. Psalm 110 says it all

"Sit here at my right side
until I put your enemies under your feet."

² From Zion the LORD will extend your royal power.

"Rule over your enemies," he says.

Jesus took Psalm 110 and tipped it upside down. Shook it and put it on its head. For Jesus refused to defeat and rule over the enemies of Israel. I believe he could have, but he chose a different path. And this choice led him to the cross, to suffering and death. This was so wrong to the Jews. Their hope was that of the Psalm,

⁶ *He will pass judgment on the nations
and fill the battlefield with corpses;
he will defeat kings all over the earth.*

Instead, Jesus spoke about becoming a servant ... as we read in the next chapter of Matthew

"the greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever lifts himself up will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be lifted up."

Instead of defeating the nations, Jesus inspired his followers to go out into the nations, that all the world may know of God's love.

The victory described in Psalm 110 is ours through sacrifice and suffering, especially through the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus. But it is victory with a crucial difference, not over people but over the power of sin, evil and death.

What does this have to do with us?

First, I happen to think that the whole Bible is great stuff and all of it relevant to us, and that we Christians had better read all of it. I see so many points of connection between the Old Testament and the New. I know that reading the Bible is not the easiest thing to do, but I encourage you to do it. Read it. Pick a book, maybe even one of those really old dreary ones like Leviticus and Deuteronomy. You don't have to like it all, or agree with it all – argue back at it by all means, but read it!

Look for Jesus in the Bible, all of it ... in the hopes and prophecies of the Old Testament and in the testimony of the New Testament. Keep on refreshing your understanding of who Jesus was. How can we follow him if we do not know him?

Secondly, this whole business of both inheriting and subverting the tradition applies to us also. We have inherited the treasure of the gospel wrapped in Presbyterianism. Next Sunday we celebrate 500 years of the reformation. This is a mighty inheritance, and we find our place in it. But we also need to tip it upside down, shake it and tip it on its head. Jesus can teach us how to both belong in a long story of faith and transform that story. With Jesus we learn that victory is won not by battles but by surrender. Together with

Jesus we know the reality of suffering. For the cross transforms all our theology and our politics.

Scripture References:

Matthew 22: 34-46

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "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.

Psalms 110

110 The LORD said to my lord,
"Sit here at my right side
until I put your enemies under your feet."

² From Zion the LORD will extend your royal power.
"Rule over your enemies," he says.

³ On the day you fight your enemies,
your people will volunteer.

Like the dew of early morning
your young men will come to you on the sacred hills.^[b]

⁴ The LORD made a solemn promise and will not take it back:
"You will be a priest forever
in the priestly order of Melchizedek."^[c]

⁵ The Lord is at your right side;
when he becomes angry, he will defeat kings.

⁶ He will pass judgment on the nations

and fill the battlefield with corpses;
he will defeat kings all over the earth.

⁷ The king will drink from the stream by the road,
and strengthened, he will stand victorious.

Deut 6:5-7

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Leviticus 19:18

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