



4. Oh Come Oh Come Emanuel

Jesus said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).

These words were spoken by Jesus, just after the Resurrection, to the disciples on the so called walk to Emmaus. What they point out is that while there may have been prophecies about the nature of the Messiah no one, the disciples included, understood what they really meant. In some ways you could say that they were still looking for a different kind of Messiah. And all of this may lead us to ask why it is even worthwhile to delve into what people were expecting, if no one got it right anyway. But I believe that it is valuable because the issues that prevented people from understanding who Jesus was at that time are still with us today. That is, the same objections to Jesus that those had in his time still appear today even if they may be dressed up a little differently. What follows are three different expectations that people had for the Messiah and why Jesus did not necessarily live up to those expectations.

King of the Jews: This is the first identity given to Jesus after his birth (at least by a human). The wise men show up in Bethlehem and ask, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:2). While this might be open to interpretation as to what it meant (there is a fair amount of history behind the name), I want to focus on it mainly from an earthly perspective. We did see in the last lesson that there were many who expected the Messiah to have a personality similar to that of David. In practical terms this meant someone warlike who would secure Israel’s borders and make them at least a regional power. Kingship would have very earthly connotations. This thinking is also why we had a less than enthusiastic reaction from King Herod when the wise men asked this of him. In the Gospel of Matthew we read, “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” We are not given a reason for this feeling of disturbance but it is safe to say that it has to do with the idea of an earthly kingship; that is people are viewing the Messiah as someone who will wield power in the ways that we wield power on earth. And King Herod is most likely disturbed by this for two reasons. The first has to do with his position. If there is a new king what does that make him? He is sort of the King of the Jews already. But the other objection, is less personal and would have been shared by others and this has to do with the Roman occupation. As you know the Romans did not care to have their authority challenged. And so if there was a new king and one in the order of David he could create a lot of problems with the Roman occupiers, perhaps with violence being visited on Israel to restore order. Whatever the exact reasons, this interpretation points to a very worldly Messiah - a Messiah who would do things like us if we only had a little more power. And it is important to remember that for all of those like Herod who were concerned, there was another group enthusiastically cheering for just this type of messiah. So whatever side you were on the King of the Jews expectation had a lot to do with very human things, things that were limited to a certain time and a certain place. In Mark’s Gospel we hear, “And Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ And [Jesus] answered him, ‘You have said so.’”

Creating a Holy People by whatever means necessary: The next place we see some messianic expectations comes from John the Baptist. These are usually the verses that we read early on in Advent and they can often appear shocking because most people think Advent is marked mainly by the movie *Elf* being played nonstop on TBS. But in Church we are greeted by John the Baptist and he says things like, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3). John the Baptist obviously had some pretty definite views about how this Messiah thing was going to work out – bad people were going to get what they had coming to them. In fact, later in the Gospel we find John a little confused sending his disciples to Jesus asking, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” The issue that we see

here is that John was the one who went ahead of Jesus proclaiming that the Messiah was coming, but now Jesus does not seem to be behaving in the way he had envisioned him behaving. From John's original wording it would appear that he was looking for a Messiah who similar to the King of the Jews model who would be somewhat militant, but in this case it would be more of a spiritual militancy. He would not worry as much about the Romans but would instead go after all of the Jewish slackers - the ones who were perhaps culturally Jewish but were not living lives that reflected the fullness of God's call. He would enforce the standards of Judaism quite sternly. And so in this moment we find John a little confused because Jesus is not exactly working out to be the kind of Messiah he thought that he should be. There were a lot of trees not bearing good fruit that had not been cut down.

Fix All of our Problems: The third objection to Jesus that I want to look at comes from the most infamous of the disciples, Judas. The story that best illustrates his objection comes from the Gospel of John. "Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?'" (John 12:3-5) In some ways this may be the most troubling and most modern of all the objections because it has to do with fixing immediate problems. Judas is saying that Jesus is being a bit overindulgent and should instead be using the costly ointment to help out the poor. That is he is ignoring things that could be fixed right now. The Gospel later explains that Judas really did not care about the poor but wanted to steal the money. But even if that is the case it does not invalidate his objection. And this objection is still with us today, perhaps phrased differently, but still the same thing. That objection essentially being of why does God not fix everything and put an end to our earthly suffering right now. Why does not God move some assets around so that the poor have plenty? Judas basically asserts that Jesus is doing this whole Messiah thing incorrectly and we know where this ultimately leads – to his betrayal.

The fact of the matter in all of these objections, the common thread, is that Jesus does not act in the way that we think he should act, be it not being strict enough, militant enough or caring enough. And this has obviously not gone away. Some later objections have to do with different things. Early heresies objected to Jesus humanity (not God enough) or his divinity (not human enough), but more on that later. The thing is we must always ask if our objections have to do with God or with us and our egotistical desires. We need to search ourselves and understand why certain things are hurdles for us. In the upcoming lessons we will learn more about exactly how Jesus acted and what this says about the nature of not only the incarnation but the nature of God. It is important to remember when looking at this the words that God spoke to Isaiah when he said, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord."

Questions

1. What are the issues that can arise when something is different from what we expected? Can it blind us to things?
2. Why do we often put God into categories that we can understand and then object to the way God may behave?
3. Does coercion work in making people behave better? If it does are the changes lasting or strictly superficial?
4. An article in the Economist stated, "For the past century and more, many people have assumed that God is absent. The massacres of two world wars, the atrocities of the Holocaust and the gulags, have occurred despite the supposed existence of a divine source of love, truth and compassion"¹ Why do you think God doesn't "do more?"
5. How much of God do you think we are able to understand and how does this understanding come about?

¹ *Silence as Presence*, The Economist, December 22, 2018.