

Matthew | The keys to the kingdom

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Alison Sampson ~ Matthew 16:13-20

Welcome, welcome to our wonderful city! This beautiful shrine is to the shepherd god, Pan. The guardian of the flocks, as you know, he's always one for the ladies. Fellas, lock up your daughters! Pan doesn't always do consent; we wouldn't want a 'situation' now, would we? On your left, you'll see a marble temple. This exquisite building was erected by King Herod in honour of Emperor Augustus, Son of God. Notice the fine detailing, the craftsmanship. Just imagine what it took to place such large stones! The armies of slaves! So awe-inspiring!

On your right, we have King Philip's Big Build. This major works project substantially expanded the city's footprint. Philip, of course, had his palace here. He also gave us our new name: Caesarea Philippi. Doesn't it roll beautifully off the tongue? Or, as you English speakers might say, Caesar City, by Philip. I don't know if you have anything like it. Kingsville, perhaps? Leningrad? Trumptown Vanceii? Anyway, whether you've come for business or pleasure, it's wonderful to have you here. Visa, Mastercard, American Express? We accept them all. Your hotel is this way.

It's here, in a city devoted to emperors, kings, and a shepherd god famous for sexual predation and generating panic, that Jesus asks his question: 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

His disciples reply, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

John, who spoke out against King Herod the tetrarch and his wife, and was imprisoned then beheaded for his trouble. Elijah, who preached against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and spent most of his life on the run. Jeremiah, whose counsel offended multiple kings and who was repeatedly imprisoned and threatened with death. And all the other pesky prophets who were shaped by a vision of God's justice and mercy which put them at odds with their kings: these are the people with whom Jesus is being compared.

'But,' says Jesus, 'who do you say I am?'

'You are the Christ, the son of the living God,' says Peter.

To our Christianised ears, this sounds pretty innocuous. We all know that Jesus is God's son; it's a central claim of our faith. But in fact it's the icing on the anti-king cake. We've just heard a list of people who lived in opposition to the powers that be, and we've heard it in Caesar City. Now Peter is saying that Jesus is God's son, which is exactly how Emperor Augustus describes himself. With these words,

Peter is effectively rejecting the Emperor and declaring a very different loyalty: not to Caesar, but to Christ.

Who, then, is the Christ? Last week, I compared Jesus with Joshua, and outlined their competing visions of salvation. Today, we are faced with a similar tension: who or what is the Christ?

One strand of Judaism was awaiting a Messiah, a Christ, an anointed one who would use military means to deliver people from oppression. In this understanding, derived from Zechariah among others, Jesus is this anointed king. He'll lead a rebel army, he'll throw out all the other kings, and finally Israel will be free.

Another strand was looking for a different Messiah. Someone, perhaps, a little more like Moses, who had neither sword nor army yet who led the people out of enslavement and the Egyptian economy. As described in Exodus, Pharaoh's Egypt is the archetypal worldly kingdom. It's built on violence, domination and fear. People are reduced to economic units. No matter how hard they work, they can never satisfy Pharaoh's impossible targets. And despite his desperate desire for more – more money, more power, more empire, more bricks – Pharaoh is so driven by fear that he ends up destroying the very workers who are creating his wealth.

Indeed, the opening chapter of Exodus provides us with a capsule description of empire. It involves the centralisation of power and the funnelling of wealth to the few. It's a world of monopolies and exploitation, economic targets and KPI's, endless competition and impossible striving just to stay ahead of the game. Sound familiar? It's a world in which people are defined by their productivity and constantly pressured to do more. They have no value beyond what they add to the economy. Life is cheap, and readily destroyed; and it is out of this that Moses leads the people.

Going back to Jesus and what sort of Messiah he is, we might notice that Matthew laces his account with allusions to Moses. We have leaders, clouds, mountaintops, and a divine presence; we have teachings. But where Moses goes up a mountain and brings back the Ten Commandments, Jesus goes up and preaches the Beatitudes. And what does he say? 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth ... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5:1-12). In other words, it won't be the violent who inherit the earth, but the humble. It won't be the organisers of imperial games who are called God's children, but their victims. And it won't be the proud and exploitative to whom the kingdom belongs, but the poor, the vulnerable, the just, the persecuted. No wonder the powerful perceive Jesus as a threat.

For Jesus calls people into a very different set of loyalties than that of the kingdom around them: and if enough people live them out, Rome itself will fall. For rather than a kingdom where might is right, money talks and growth is the only option, Jesus invites his followers into gentleness and generosity, into peace-making, into feeding, into teaching and healing, into a life lived without fear and given for the sake of others.

This is not Caesar City with all its monuments to power, but the cruciform life. The emperor is not the centre, but the poor, the marginalised, the powerless. And it's not a kingdom which fights violence with violence, but a world where God overcomes the forces of death through suffering, through weakness, through vulnerability, through shame, and through enduring death itself.

This is the kingdom to which Jesus gives Peter the keys, and the gates of Hades – the realm of the dead – shall not overcome it, he says. And it's on this wobbly rock, this disciple who is still discerning between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of heaven, that Jesus builds the church.

Again and again I hear people say that Jesus never intended the church. If the church looks like every other kingdom, then this is certainly true. If the church is about the accumulation of wealth and power, then it is not what Jesus intended. If its decisions are based on efficiency, productivity, palatability or shoring up its own reputation, then this is not what Jesus was on about, either. If it rejects the scandal of the cross and turns from shame, suffering and death, then it has lost its way. And if its vision is shaped by fear or self-protection and a silence around faith, then it has nothing new to offer the world and the people who make this comment are right.

But Jesus certainly came to establish a sign and cipher of the kingdom of heaven, built on the rocky foundation of wobbly disciples who struggle to work out what it means. He called it the *ekklesia*, the assembly, the congregation, the gathering; we might call it Jesus' church. So what does this look like?

Gleaning from Matthew as a whole, I suggest that, in Jesus' church, people are not valued for what they contribute. They are not units of productivity; they are not defined by their work. Nor are they valued for their status, gifts, abilities or calling, or their family of origin or religious credentials. Instead, people are valued simply because they are made in the image of God, in all their frailty, vulnerability and humanness.

In Jesus' church, all life is precious. No one is sacrificed on the altar of efficiency; might is not right; mercy is key. People who are disabled are fully embraced, as are those who are sick or dying. Lonely people belong, as do the economically useless and outcast. Suffering people find healing and wholeness through the compassion and presence of God.

In Jesus' church, the gentle shepherd leads them. Unlike the shepherd god Pan, there is no predation, no sexual abuse, nothing to induce panic. Instead it's a safe place, a kind community, where the needs of the most vulnerable are placed front and centre and where people live without fear.

In Jesus' church, bigger is not better and nor is more. Instead, little ones are centred. Tiny seeds are watered and nurtured, but the Holy Spirit is entrusted with growth. It's also a place which trusts in suffering and death, because it knows newness comes out of the ashes.

And Jesus' church, this sign and cipher of God's kingdom, finds itself at odds with the powers again and again. For its values, its decision-making and that which it treasures are held in contempt by the proud, while its healing, liberating, saving effects are perceived as a threat by the powerful.

To those of us who benefit from the way things are, such a church might not sound very attractive. But to those of us who are sick, suffering or dying; to those of us who are wandering the maze of dementia; to those of us who lonely or grieving; to those of us who are otherwise vulnerable; to those of us who are trying to live in this economy and finding it utterly vicious and soul-destroying; and to those of us who seek a place to put our burdens down and belong, the church of Jesus sounds like a very good place indeed.

So let us not conform to the pattern of this world (Romans 2:2). Let us not trust in the accumulation of wealth, but instead 'consider the wildflowers' (Matthew 6:26). Let us not honour the powerful but the vulnerable, and let us be vulnerable ourselves. In all things, let us be a church where Jesus is followed and proclaimed and known. And may our loyalties and our lives witness to the most wonderful city, where the living God chooses to dwell. Amen. Ω