

A sermon preached by Professor John Barton
1st Sunday in Advent 2006

Messianic Prophecy

There are basically three sorts of Christmas presents, two of which are quite uninteresting. These are the presents you want, because you asked for them, and the presents you don't want at all (Betjeman's 'hideous tie, so kindly meant', for example). But there is a third kind: presents you didn't know you wanted, but which as soon as you see them make you say, 'Yes! That was exactly what I needed, though I'd never have thought of it.' You feel the giver knows you better than you knew yourself.

There are few indeed of this third kind of present in most people's Christmas. But they are a parable for what I want to say in today's sermon, which is to be about the fulfilment of Messianic prophecy by our Lord Jesus Christ. Let me explain.

Traditional Christian thinking about Messianic prophecy and its fulfilment operates with a simple scheme. In this scheme the Old Testament contains a number of predictions of what the Messiah, the hoped-for new King of the line of David, would be like. The story of Jesus in the Gospels shows that he corresponds to these predictions: hence, he is indeed the promised Messiah. The predictions occur mainly in the books of the prophets, and a number of them are read at Christmas carol services: Isaiah's Emmanuel prophecy, Micah's promotion of the status of 'little Bethlehem', Jeremiah's foreseeing the new king who will be called 'the Lord is our righteousness'. The fact that Jesus fulfils them point by point shows, in the traditional view, that he is indeed the promised one.

Problems arise as soon as biblical scholars get their hands on this tidy scheme. First, they point out, many of the predictions were not originally Messianic prophecies at all. That is true, for example, of the evocative passage in Isaiah 52-3 that we read on Good Friday about the suffering servant of the Lord who was 'despised and rejected, yet he never opened his mouth': almost no Jew in the first century thought that was a prophecy of the Messiah. Second, some of the prophecies do not in fact correspond to Jesus anyway. Isaiah foretold that the child to be born would be called Emmanuel, 'God with us' in Hebrew, but in fact he was called Jesus or Yeshua, a version of the Old Testament name Joshua. Third, some of the alleged prophecies are very far-fetched or even non-existent: St Matthew tells us that Joseph settled in Nazareth to fulfil the prophecy 'He shall be called a Nazarene', but no such prophecy can be found anywhere in the Old Testament. It is not very surprising that Jews on the whole reject the so-called 'argument from prophecy', saying that the texts have many other possible

applications and that Jesus falls far short of fulfilling them. Biblical scholars tend to think many had a more immediate application: Emmanuel, for example, was probably meant to be the name given to one of the children of one of the kings in whose reign Isaiah was prophesying. In any case, prophecy in ancient Israel was not to do with predicting the remote future, but with foretelling imminent events: even the Messianic oracles there are, are normally grounded in the belief that the new great King will come very soon, not that he will do so in several centuries' time, as the prophets have to be interpreted as meaning if they are to have predicted the coming of Jesus.

If Jesus was the Messiah, he was as the title of a book by the Dutch Dominican Lucas Grollenberg puts it, an 'unexpected' Messiah. With hindsight, his followers were able to find passages in the Old Testament that seemed, often to an uncanny degree, to fit his case. The 'suffering servant' passage is an extraordinary example, and it's open to Christians to believe that its presence in the Old Testament is providential. The same may be said of Psalm 22, which he quoted on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', which goes on to say, 'They parted my garments among them, and cast lots for my clothing' – though some scholars think the corresponding incident in St John's Passion story was made up in order to fulfil the prophecy, a possibility which injects an uneasy note into our discussion but one that can't be ignored. But it is in any case hindsight that discovers the passages in question. No-one before Jesus thought that these passages added up to create a coherent profile of what the Messiah would be like. They are passages culled from here and there by Christians who already believed that Jesus was the Promised One, not a syllabus of texts that were already perceived beforehand as a prescription for who the Messiah would be.

And where there are clear outlines to what the Messiah would be like, Jesus mostly seems to have been the opposite. The one absolutely clear feature of the Messiah was that he would be a new King David, the person to whom in the Old Testament the term 'anointed one' – in Hebrew *mashiach*, in English Messiah – originally applied. But Jesus was not a King. To recognize him as none the less the Messiah is to change the meaning of Messiah.

It's here that my opening parable of the Christmas present begins to apply. Jesus was not the Messiah anyone was expecting. But once we have encountered him we can say, as Christians, that he is the Messiah people ought to have expected, the person God sent because he knew better than we did what it was we actually needed. Once we have him, we can look back and see dim prefigurements within the Old Testament and perhaps elsewhere in the history of human culture of the kind of person he was, and Isaiah's servant is probably a better candidate for that than is the messianic king of some of the prophetic texts. But no-one

would have predicted Jesus. If he pulls threads together, they aren't threads anyone could have foreseen being pulled together in quite that way. The present is exactly what we need, but we would never have had the wit to ask for it.

If Jesus was the Messiah, then, he was not the kind of Messiah anyone was expecting. As he told Pilate in the Gospel we will have heard last week on the feast of Christ the King, he was not the kind of king whose servants would fight to establish his kingdom. He was a wholly new kind of king, who to all external appearances did not look or behave like a king at all. It's no wonder that so few of his contemporaries recognized in him the Messiah they were looking for, and they can hardly be blamed, though that didn't stop many early Christians from blaming them. He systematically disappointed more or less all the expectations people had of the Messiah, since he didn't get involved in an armed struggle to defeat the Romans, didn't have followers who could plausibly administer a new kingdom, and didn't claim royal power or privileges. In fact, if the traditional Messiah was what you were expecting, Jesus was about the last person you would identify as that Messiah: an artisan from no particular family, living very modestly though not in actual poverty, associating with highly unsuitable people, and finally being executed as a common criminal. People in the Roman Empire often regarded Christianity as a religion fit only for slaves, and that of course is exactly what it was: it was a religion that turned the world upside down, which (as the Magnificat puts it) 'cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the humble and meek'. If we define the Messiah by the expectations people at the time had of the Messiah, then it would be fair to say that Jesus was *not* the Messiah. From a Christian perspective, we might rather put it by saying that Jesus redefined what the Messiah was. He is the answer to the question we didn't ask but ought to have asked. He is the king who shows us what being a king should really amount to. He is something so new that it doesn't fit the old categories. He is what in the history of science is often called a paradigm-shift, where the old framework will no longer contain the new data.

What does it mean in practical terms to recognize in Jesus the Messiah, the king of Israel and, in fact, the king of the whole world, whose kingship derives from God? It means accepting that the values he stood for are those that are truly dominant in the universe as God sees it. If we read the Gospels, we see all our expectations of what constitutes power being overturned, as we recognize in the teaching and life of this man a new set of values. The Christian gospel as proclaimed by Jesus reverses the normal social pressures and offers us a complete redefinition of how life ought to be lived. It was put very well about twenty years ago by Gerd Theissen, who teaches in Heidelberg, in his book *Biblical Faith*:

Social pressure means that conduct is controlled from outside and takes place in order to satisfy social pressure. But Jesus says: when you give alms, pray or fast, do so in secret, where social control does not extend.

Social pressure means internalising family, people and state as authorities imposing obligations. But Jesus requires of his followers that they should break with their families; he presents foreigners ... as exemplary models and makes a sharp distinction between the demands of the emperor and those of God.

Social pressure means internalising tradition and its rules governing conduct. But Jesus measures tradition by his insight into God's will, and disregards social norms if they go against elementary ethical demands.

Social pressure means sanctions to the point of exterminating those whose conduct deviates from the norm. But Jesus calls for facing up to social pressure to the point of sacrificing one's own life – and he himself was an example of that.

If we recognize Jesus as our Messiah, we are accepting that these values are to be our values, and that we will work to try to see them implemented in our world. That may involve personal dedication and it may also require political action. But in no way may we seek to implement these values by methods that contradict the values themselves, for that is to drop back into the kind of activity that Jesus came to set us free from. Our lives must be true to the values we try to promote.

So the fulfilment of prophecy turns out to mean the way Jesus, and we as his followers, remain true to the pattern of living that God wills for humankind. Jesus is the perfect example of this pattern, combining the best of the teaching of the law and the prophets in the Old Testament, as well as the best insights of the human race in its other scriptures and wise teachings. He provides the guiding thread with which we can trace the hand of God in all that went before him, giving us hindsight, and so knowledge of the real questions to which we need God's answers. Those answers – answers to questions we could never have devised ourselves – are available in him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

John Barton