

Christ/Messiah/Son Of David

First things first: 'Christ' is not Jesus' surname. It is a title. The Hebrew version is Messiah - in English it means 'anointed one'. To be anointed is to have oil poured on your head. For Jews it had powerful symbolism. It was sign that God had chosen someone for a special purpose. Ancient kings of Israel – like King David – were anointed. King David (1000 BC) was revered as the greatest king in Israel's past. The line of kings from David died out during the time the Jews were in exile in Babylon (586 BC). There grew a yearning for a new king, a Messiah of David's line, who would bring to fulfilment all God's promises made through the prophets (see beside).

What did the people of Jesus' time expect of the Messiah?

People expected a Messiah who would bring God's rule to earth, to establish peace and justice in the land. Some would certainly have thought of a warrior-king, someone to smash the Romans and free Israel of all occupying armies. This is understandable when you realise Israel had been on the receiving end of various conquering armies for hundreds of years.

The following passage is taken from Zechariah's prophecy (c. 520-517 BC) just after the Jews returned from exile.

Shout with gladness, daughter of Jerusalem!

See now, your king comes to you;

he is victorious, he is triumphant, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will banish chariots from Ephraim

and horses from Jerusalem; the bow of war will be banished.

He will proclaim peace for the nations.

His empire shall stretch from sea to sea...

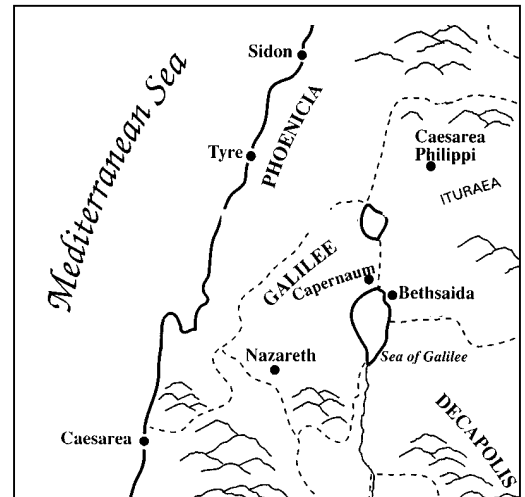
Caesarea Philippi 8:27-30

'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.' (8:29)

This town had a double-barrelled name – the first name refers to the Emperor, the second to Herod's Son, Philip, who built up the place. It was a classy town some 40 km to the north of Galilee, near the source of the Jordan. It was near here that a crucial turning point in the Gospel occurs.

The disciples throw at Jesus all the various opinions about who he is – Elijah or another prophet, John the Baptist returned, and so on. Jesus directs the question at them. What do they think?

As usual Peter speaks up; he calls Jesus the Messiah. An incredible insight – you are the one promised, the one prophesied of old, the one to establish God's reign on earth.



Immediately Jesus has two things to do. One, to get the disciples to keep quiet about him being the Messiah. Two, to tell them the kind of Messiah he is – one to suffer and die for others. Peter, so right moments before, is now so wrong. He can't accept the Messiah must suffer. Jesus has some severe words for him.

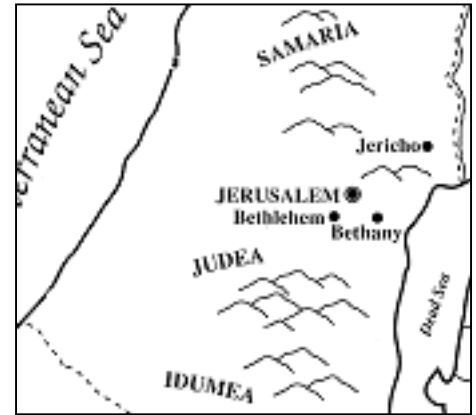
Blind Bartimaeus 10:46-52

'Jesus! Son of David! Take pity on me!' (10:47)

Jericho is on the pilgrim's Passover route to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus calls Jesus 'Son of David'. This is a messianic title, very closely related to Messiah. It means 'David's descendant'. It implies that Jesus is the King who will fulfil all the religious hopes began through David, 1000 years before. After being cured, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the road, suggesting that he's now a new disciple.

Though blind, Bartimaeus can 'see' (recognise) Jesus' true identity. Ahead on the steep, winding twelve-mile climb to Jerusalem await the religious authorities. These people can see but are 'blind' to who Jesus really is.



Entry to Jerusalem 11:1.11

'Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the coming kingdom of King David, our father! Praise God!' (11:9-10)

The pilgrims flocking to Jerusalem acclaim Jesus with messianic cries. There are echoes of the Prophet Zechariah: *See now, your king comes to you; he is victorious, he is triumphant, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* (Zc 9:9)

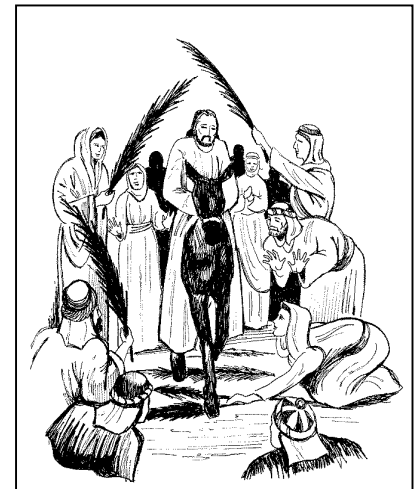
The people expected a messiah in the manner of King David, the greatest of Israel's kings. Whereas past kings like David and Solomon would have ridden in for their coronation on a splendid warhorse, Jesus rides in on a humble donkey.

How many of the people who shouted 'God bless him!' will be shouting 'Crucify him!' in five days' time?

Christ: For Christians today

Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. They believe he is the one who sets up God's Kingdom on earth, establishes justice and peace and conquers enemies. The question is: what enemies? The answer is evil, slavery to sin and death. These, in Christian understanding, are the real enemies. You could live in a land free from any oppressors and yet still be held captive by these. These 'inner oppressors' block humans having life in all its fullness – now and in eternity.

Jesus was not anointed with oil, but with the Holy Spirit – symbolised by the dove in his baptism. Christians believe that they too receive 'the anointing of the Holy Spirit' in their baptism. This, in turn, makes them 'other Christs' and 'Christ for others' in their daily lives.



Did you know ...?

Early Christians were not called 'Christians' at first. They were followers of 'The Way'.

Their Roman enemies called them 'atheists' since they wouldn't accept the Roman gods.

St Luke tells us that it was in Antioch, a great city in Syria, that Jesus' followers were first called Christians.

Activities

1 Choosing the best endings, answer the following questions in a sentence each.

What title did St Mark first give Jesus?

- A Lord
- B Christ
- C Son of God

Which event in Jewish history led to increased expectation of the Messiah?

- A Exodus led by Moses from Egypt
- B Exile in Babylon
- C Building of Solomon's Temple

Near to which town did Peter declare Jesus to be the Christ?

- A Jericho
- B Caesarea Philippi
- C Caesarea

Which of the following is not an alternative for 'Christ'?

- A Messiah
- B Son of Man
- C Anointed One

When, in Mark's Gospel, does Jesus first speak of his coming suffering?

- A after the Transfiguration
- B after Peter declares him 'the Christ'
- C during the Last Supper

Jesus was a 'secret Messiah' – why?

- A false expectations from locals
- B wasn't really sure of himself
- C pagans might get to hear about him

2 **'Do you believe in the coming of a Messiah? If so, how will you recognise him?'** Imagine you are a journalist of Jesus' time. You put the questions above to a Roman Officer posted to Judea. Here is an answer:

'Absolutely not. Anyone who wants to make himself a king round here would have to run it by Caesar – or else. Most of these locals are besotted with the idea of some warrior who's going to kick us out. Push out the greatest empire the world has ever known? No way. Every so often we have to crucify some crazed preacher who thinks he has a divine mission.'

You put the same questions to:

- a) A Sadducee – one of the wealthy priestly families connected to the Temple.
- b) A Galilean Zealot – one who believes the Romans should be removed from Israel.
- c) Simon Peter – before Caesarea Philippi.
- d) Simon Peter – after Caesarea Philippi.

Write what you imagine their answers would be.

3 **'Messiah/Christ is an ancient Jewish concept that makes no sense to the Christian today.'**

- look at the words associated with Messiah - king, liberator, bringer of God's Kingdom, destroyer of enemies ... very meaningful to oppressed Jews of Palestine – but to Christians today?
- many Christians have no idea of what Christ means really; they probably think it's Jesus' surname
- even the name relates to 'anointing' – something that had great symbolic meaning for the Jews ...

- the role of the Messiah - king, liberator, bringer of God's Kingdom, destroyer of enemies – does have meaning for today's Christians when interpreted
- Christianity has its roots in Judaism – 'Messiah'/'Christ' is one concept that reminds Christians of this
- 'Christ' was a title that early Christian leaders were happy to proclaim of Jesus; today's Christians should have the same attitude ...