

Talk on 30 August 2020- Lessons from Mark's Gospel, week 10

Jesus quietens his critics– Mark 12: 28-34

The outcome of the presidential election in the USA will have huge ramifications for the world community. Whoever sits in the oval office has a great deal of influence on where we go as a global community, maybe more than we would want. Under pressure how will the candidates respond? What will they betray of their real personalities? And what will we learn of how they then might govern? There's lots to weigh and consider and for us to pray about.

How does Jesus do in this encounter? What grade would you give him? As an aside, we must continue to pray for the universities and the schools as they manage the debacle over grades this summer, no matter how difficult a task it was in the first place. Let's look at the way Jesus responds to him.

1. A Question of intent

Scribes and Pharisees don't usually get a good press in the gospels. We can easily imagine them as the establishment challenging and opposing Jesus' teaching actions, defensively responding to the threat to their way of life. It's always good to remember that if we were alive then we might well be seen as the establishment and be threatened by that too!

Here though we have a scribe who has been watching the action as Jesus responds to 2 previous questions.

He is impressed enough to stay and engage. He is well versed in the law, the first 5 books of the Bible as we have it today, and what it might mean to apply those laws in day to day life – all 613 of them! Most villages would have had a scribe who could draft legal documents such as marriage contracts, mortgages, land sales and so on for the community to function.

But here we have a scribe who is not aggressive, simply wanting to engage. He asks Jesus a classic question – which is the most important commandment of all? Just like anyone might ask a rabbi in conversation, to get them to interpret the law for the present time.

The scribe approaches Jesus sincerely, openly, wanting to engage. No matter what question he asked, he meant what he said. And Jesus responds to his openness with a conversational reply, and shares life with him. When we too approach Jesus we need to come humbly, just as we are, ready to learn and listen and engage. And he will respond as he did to the scribe here in the passage, thoughtfully, openly, carefully.

Perhaps that's something we the church today need to remember – when new people come and join us, just looking, for a baptism, to get married, in need or just curious, what sort of a reception do we give them? We need to assume that they, like the scribe, mean well even if they have not worked it all out yet. A question of intent.

2. A Question of Law.

Jesus' response to the scribe is to summarise the law. He refers to the Shema, something every committed Jew would say twice a day and know as well as we know the Lord's Prayer. The Shema talks of heart, soul, strength, referring to emotions, spirit and will. Jesus seems to add 'mind' to the list: you need to use your mind, your intellect, to be a follower of me he seems to say. And he uses the word 'all' 4 times to emphasise the total devotion God calls for from his people.

St Paul in his letter to the Romans, considered by some to be his magnum opus, says this in chapter 12 verse 1: Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. How we think really does matter to God.

A friend of mine lives in High Wycombe which as you may know has some especially steep hills. The road he lives on is one such of these, and when he first moved there he parked his car on the road, put on the handbrake and walked away. Later that day he heard a massive crash as his car, which had sprung its handbrake, crashed into his neighbours' garage at the bottom of the hill. What a mess!

Some people seem to think that to be a follower of Jesus you need to put your mind in park, put your handbrake on and hold yourself back, for the Christian faith will not stand up to scrutiny. They think if they do engage intellectually that the wheels will come off and they will be left with a real mess, a car crash.

Jesus completely disagrees with that position – your mind matters, you need to use your intelligence, your perspective on the world, as you follow him. That's why there are so many scientists in history who were followers of Christ: Francis Bacon, Galileo, Blaise Pascal, Robert Boyle, Lewis Carroll, Louis Pasteur and so on – and yes there were women too!

I wonder, if you were looking for a new priest what one key question you would want to ask them? But then you've just got one – you could still ask him. So what would you ask?

When you approach Jesus humbly, you can bring your questions to him. And that's why house groups, or lent groups, and so on, are so important – so that we can ask the questions we have of the one we follow with friends who are also asking humble questions. What question do you have about this passage? What would you want to ask Jesus that does not make sense? A question of law.

3. A Question of Scope.

And there's one further twist I want to refer you to today. The scribe thought he was interrogating Jesus but he finds Jesus is stretching him. Jesus answers his question, but adds something too – to love your neighbour as yourself. What we may feel is familiar, to the people then was radical. What he is saying is that to worship and honour God in all things, you need to show that honour in the way you treat others.

To a Jew 'neighbour' meant other Jews, though of course the Old Testament reminds them of their duty to the widow, the poor and the alien. Neighbour today does not just mean other church members, but anyone we find ourselves with – family member, next door person, colleague, school friend, tennis or golf partner. Jesus has expanded the scope of the Law not just to include Jews but all people. And therefore, the scope of loving God applies to all contexts – to the whole of life.

In this time of lock-down we are offered so many ways to love our neighbour. And people will judge the church on how we respond – if we let them down then they dismiss the whole church as irrelevant and lacking authenticity.

And it matters within the church community too! This last week I received an email from someone who is also a follower of Jesus. Not that you would have known it from the tone and content of his email!

Philippians 4:5 Let your gentleness be evident to all.

Gentleness=epieikes – reasonableness – are we known as reasonable people? How easy is it for us to lose our rag and assume the worst? And the only way to grow in this is to draw closer to God, for that then our love of God spills over into our love of neighbour.

Jesus expands the scope of the law by including love of neighbour. No one else would have dared, but being God he did. And they dared not ask him any more questions. A question of scope.

Conclusion

The church is about people more than place. Whilst we need somewhere to meet due to the vagaries of the English weather the key part is the people, who we meet with, and the focus, who we meet for. No matter how long we have been a member of the church there are still many questions to ask and be answered. We need to keep on questioning and continue to be open to learn throughout our lives, as the scribe was. Perhaps he too joined those following Jesus and we will one day meet him and discuss what he learned that day with him.

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