

Questions/Answers – Mark 12: 28-34

A couple of weeks ago I talked about how open we may be to hearing the truthful answer. With lateral flow tests and PCR home kits becoming a normal everyday occurrence, we all await with bated breath for the second stripe to appear or not and the phone to ding telling us positive or negative.

Certainly I have done my fair share of watching and waiting for the answer these past two weeks and although the answer was not what I had hoped, knowing the situation helped keep others safe and allowed contingency plans to be put into place.

Today we see another dialogue in which Jesus is being questioned. And again we see a difficult truth being shared. But before we get into the body of this text I want us to consider the scene.

Often we have seen the teachers of the Law asking questions as a way of trying to trick Jesus, trap him into saying something which can be used against him and his followers. Perhaps we have become slightly prejudiced to see all questioners having ulterior motives?

This encounter I believe is different.

The preceding verses tell us that Pharisees and members of Herod's party had been sent to interrogate Jesus with the precise intention of trapping him.

The Sadducees then approach him with a riddle about numerous weddings and marriages. Again this seems like an attempt to twist things and catch Jesus out.

So the scene has been set. Jesus has been lured into a potential trap with well organised conspirators asking about money and taxes and marriage.

We could understand if Jesus was beginning to tire of these attacks, always on his guard, wondering when the next assault will come. It is at this point that another Teacher of the Law enters the scene.

It is obvious he has been listening on the sidelines, has heard the response to his fellow scholars and leaders and been impressed by the interaction between Jesus and the Sadducees. His question is not about legal loopholes or gathering incriminating evidence – He asks Which commandment is the most important of all?

If we set aside our preconceived ideas about Pharisees we will remember that as a respected rabbi – which Jesus was – he would have been very familiar and comfortable with the cut and thrust of discussion and debate. Rather than this being seen as a contentious way of dialogue it was actually embedded in ancient tradition and expectation. This was the way that Jewish leaders had sought to explore and mine the depths of the Torah. They did not believe that scripture was blindly authoritative in the way that some want to see it today. Rather they saw scripture as something to be poured over. Almost like a rare gem, it was to be looked at from different angles, approached with different mindsets, chewed over and digested. To do so involved argument and counter-argument, comparisons to others scriptures, imaginative retellings through Midrash that allowed other interpretations to be teased out. A very different approach as to how many discern scripture in the 21st century.

And even in the midst of what may have been entrapment, this was still a sign of the albeit grudging respect but respect nonetheless in which he was held. Other leaders looked to him for his wisdom, weighed how it stacked up against others.

Usually Jesus played by different rules, turning the question back onto his interrogators, but today he gives a straight answer – or at least straighter than usual.

The teacher of the Law most probably had the Ten Commandments in mind when he asked the question— understandable as these were the tenets of faith within the Torah and Jesus answers directly from scripture but combines a foundational scripture which would have been as natural as breathing to a Jew with one that was little known and gives them equal weight.

Perhaps this teacher was genuinely wanting to know the commandment which was most important from an academic point of view? Perhaps he wanted to nail the one thing down that would ensure righteousness and give him a get out of jail free card if some of the other lesser ones were broken? Whatever the reason it was not murder or adultery or theft or lying which was paramount – the number one commandment was not how we regard other people but how we regard God.

The *Shema Yisrael* would have been ingrained into the hearts and minds of the Jewish people from the youngest age. It was the most important part of a Jewish prayer service and devout Jews would recite it at least twice every day.

Jesus turned to the Torah for this scripture – notably Deuteronomy and Numbers.

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. This is how we are to live a life of righteousness and holiness – not by focusing on our behaviour but by making God our focus – acknowledging who God is and loving God with our whole selves.

We have heard these verses so often that they may have lost their impact but for a first century Jew to hear this scripture being given as the most important commandment must have been a wake up call. It should be for us too.

Because if we are honest with ourselves we know how easy it is to take our focus off God and let the life around us, the people around us, the hurts and personal pain we feel, consume our attention.

And once we do that we start to focus on behaviour rather than devotion.

If we make moral behaviour our focus we will find ourselves disappointed by the actions of others – people will always let us down just as we will always let others down, and we will grow distant from God, trying to please Him or walking away from what feels like impossible demands.

When we make God our focus and cultivate our love for God we miraculously find that Godly behaviour flows from us. Which naturally flows into the second most important commandment – loving your neighbour. And to focus on God, on loving God with all the different dimensions of heart and soul and mind and strength puts us all in a position of Grace.

The first part of the commandment – really well known to his listeners – but the second part? Well that came from an obscure verse in Leviticus. This is a book which gives great detail about what is not allowed – the laws governing all sorts of human relationships – commercial, sexual, familial, legal, occult – everything was covered and hidden away are these seven words – you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Scripture filled with laws and judgements on behaviour and practices and Jesus strips it away to hone in on one commandment. That one commandment – love God and love our neighbours as ourselves – if those were kept then we would have no need of any other commandment.

The two are inseparable – love of God results in an outworking of love for our neighbour and we are unable to love our neighbour without the

love of God coursing through us, strengthening, inspiring, guiding, challenging our thoughts and actions.

Why do we meet on a Sunday to worship together? Because we try to love God with all our mind and soul. Why do we serve on Tuesday evenings with refugees and migrants and their children? Because we try to love God with all our heart and we are called to show and share that love with our neighbours regardless of colour of skin or religion or orientation. Why do we commit to time in prayer? Because we try to love God with all our strength and it is through prayer that we are strengthened.

The dialogue finishes with the teacher of the Law saying you are right – he gets Jesus and Jesus says you are not far from the kingdom of God.

The difficult truth has surfaced again. But take heart for difficult although this truth is – I see it being lived out in the life and witness of this congregation – the sacrificial service to elderly and young, the generous sharing of talents with stranger and neighbour, the unfailing care and compassion showered on those who are ill or bereaved or sad. The faithful prayer warriors who uphold so many in their daily prayers. The resilience which has brought you through a time of great trial and challenge. A resilience born of a love of God and a love of neighbour.

Can we do better? Yes we can. But we can echo the response of this Teacher of the Law and say to Jesus yes you are right. And maybe Jesus even now is saying you are not far from the kingdom of God.