

And a Second is Like It (Matthew 22: 34-46)

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Over the past four weeks, we've been working our way through passages in Matthew's gospel that describe the confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The leaders want to know the basis of Jesus' authority to teach and enact his Messianic claim, and they put to him a whole series of questions designed to get him to let something slip. The crowds might be taken in, but they're not – and they're determined to expose his fakery and ungodliness.

Well, that's a forgiving reading of their attempts to entrap him; a less charitable interpretation is that they recognise how threatening he is to their power in a delicately calibrated religio-political system, and so they seek deliberately to undermine him. Whatever is really going on for them, by this stage in Matthew's portrayal, the leaders are starting to look a bit like Wily Coyote in the Roadrunner cartoon. And here's another packet of DIY explosives about to blow up in their faces.

Last week, it was the Sadducees who had a go. This week we read: 'When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together'. Commentator Frederick Bruner notes that the Greek phrase here for 'they gathered together' is exactly the same as is used in the Greek translation of Ps 2, 'and the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed'.¹ Then one of them, 'a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"' But this turns out to be not such a difficult one after all. The first part of Jesus' answer to this testing question is not original. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" is a

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p.410.

quotation drawn directly from the Hebrew Scriptures, and devout Jews prayed this commandment every morning and evening of their lives. So far, so obvious.

Jesus then fuses this commandment with another: ‘And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’. According to Bruner, this fusion of the two commandments is original but the command to love your neighbour is not.² So Jesus’ answer is really totally unexceptionable, totally mainstream in the traditions of Israel. And so the Pharisees find themselves with nothing to say in response; their testing question has fizzled out like one of Wily Coyote’s dud fuses. But while they’re hanging around, still ‘gathered together’, Jesus lobbs one back at them. ‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ And I wonder if we could paraphrase his meaning: ‘You’re so sure you know what the Messiah will look like, you’re so sure you know how to interpret the texts of prophecy – well, what do you make of this textual conundrum?’ How can the Messiah, who is said to be the son of David, be also David’s Lord? He confounds their assurance that they know what they’re looking for and so, ‘from that day’ no one dared ask him any more questions.

The tragic irony, however, is that though they may have been (as it were) defeated, they have not been converted. They’ve tacitly acknowledged the lawfulness of Jesus’ response; they cannot fault his teaching of the ‘double love command’ as authoritative in human life. But knowing the right answer to a theological quiz is not the same thing as really knowing what it means, let alone becoming capable of living it out in any consistent way – as their subsequent actions will make painfully clear.

Which of course brings us to us, and how Jesus’ teaching of love of God and neighbour constitutes our essential calling and discipleship. Well, as I’m sure most of you have experienced, much homiletic ink has been spilt elaborating these themes, starting with the parable of the Good Samaritan which Jesus himself tells in Luke’s version of this testing encounter with the lawyer. The point is commonly made, for example, that if you say you love God but do not love your neighbour then you’re

² Bruner, *Matthew*, p.412.

self-deceived; and that if we're to love our neighbours as ourselves, then a certain self-love is also necessary. As Richard Rohr puts it, 'how you love anything is how you love everything'. And with this I agree.

But what does this love look and feel like? For me, one of the most helpful insights into its essential qualities has been a story I came across in the work of the philosopher, Cora Diamond. The story is an episode in Tolstoy's great novel, *War and Peace*, which tells of a character called Pierre who's captured and brought as a prisoner of war before General Davout.³ When the general first looks up from his papers, he barely registers Pierre standing before him. He's distracted and sees Pierre as no more than 'the present prisoner, the present circumstance to be dealt with'. But then, 'something in Pierre's voice makes [the general] look at him intently', and in that moment, says Tolstoy, 'an immense number of things passed dimly through both their minds'. Tolstoy doesn't say what things, but in that second look 'human relations between the two men are established; and it is that look which saves Pierre's life'.⁴

I suspect we all recognize this kind of experience in our own lives – the experience of being pre-occupied, filled up with our own worries or cares, barely aware of the reality of another, and then suddenly 'coming to' and that felt shift to real attention and presence. Another version of this dynamic is when we become aware that we're relating to someone through the prism of our assumptions or judgements or irritation, just waiting for them to speak and act in ways that confirm what we already think we know, and then what it feels like to relax our hostility or resistance or withholding and just let someone be, becoming aware of their mystery, their life apart from us. Tolstoy expresses beautifully the subtlety of this shift in the quality of our relating – 'an immense number of things passed dimly through both their minds'. And what both these experiences suggest, I think, is that truer seeing of another, real regard and relationship, involves there being space inside ourselves, the capacity to offer hospitality to the being of the other. And before we do anything

³ Cora Diamond, 'Losing Your Concepts', *Ethics*, 98 (1988): 255-277.

⁴ Diamond, 'Losing Your Concepts', p.264.

else, it's this deep regard, this allowing the other to be that is the substance of love. It's striking how many times in the gospels, when people ask Jesus to heal them, that he's said to look 'intently' at them. Truly to be seen is to be made well.

And here's where we realise Jesus' wisdom in fusing these two commands to love. Because our capacity to create and offer this space in ourselves for another is internally connected to how fully we experience ourselves as loved, given being, not required to compete to be OK, not needing to defend ourselves against threat. And that's the experience we enter into when we give ourselves without remainder into the love of God. Automatically, space is created in us – space for ourselves and for others to be. Which is why it's simply true that 'when you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind', you 'love your neighbour as yourself' – as you yourself are loved.

Contemplative prayer is the practice by which we give ourselves to God in this radical, space-making way. In this prayer, we let go our preoccupations and compulsive habits of self-justification, self-generation. We allow God to be God, and ourselves to be simply with God. And, as Rowan Williams has said, 'as this process unfolds, [we] become more free ... to "love human beings in a human way"', to let them be and to see them 'for what they are in relation to God, not to me. And it is here', he says, 'that true justice as well as true love has its roots'.

'When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind". This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"'. And this, it turns out, is the whole box and dice. 'On these two commandments, hang all the law and the prophets'.