

The First Commandment (Mark 12. 28-34)

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We're coming to the pointy end of Mark's gospel. In last week's reading, Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho on the final leg of their journey to Jerusalem. They encountered blind Bartimaeus begging by the side of the road and, Jesus having restored his sight, were joined by him on their way. In this week's reading, we pick up the story two days later. By now, Jesus and his friends have been in and out of the city a couple of times – and on each trip in, Jesus has performed some statement of his messianic claim.

First had come the so-called 'triumphal' entry, Jesus riding on a colt and receiving the acclamation of the crowd – an entry usually interpreted in the light of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey' (Zech. 9.9). The next day, they'd come in again – and on this occasion, Jesus is said to have cursed a fruitless fig-tree and overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, both enacted signs of prophetic judgement on the religious establishment of his day.

Again, Jesus leaves the city overnight, and then returns to the temple the next morning. And at this point, unsurprisingly, those in charge ask him to give an account of himself and his behaviour: 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' (Mark 11. 28). Or, as we might say: 'You're acting like you're the Messiah, for God's sake, but who the bloody hell are you?' What follows, in Mark's version of events, are a series of controversies or debates, between Jesus and representatives of all the groups comprising the power structure of the city.

In his first encounter with officialdom, Jesus is questioned by scribes (who were the accredited teachers of Judaism), by the chief priests (who ran the temple

and much else), and the elders (who constituted the Sanhedrin or Supreme Court). Frustrated in their attempt to discredit him, they then sent a joint delegation of Pharisees and Herodians to continue the challenge. The Pharisees were devout Jews opposed to foreign rule, while the Herodians were political supporters of the Roman client king, Herod. So these were groups normally opposed to each other, but here they're united in hostility to Jesus. And finally, came the turn of the Sadducees who belonged to 'the hereditary, priestly families and were archconservatives'.¹ They had profound theological disagreements with the Pharisees, but again seem to have made common cause against this new teacher.

It sounds like an incredibly gruelling day for Jesus. As Mark presents events, he's confronted again and again by men in power who have no interest in a real conversation or in discerning with him the truth of God. All they want is to trap him into giving them a reason to dismiss, denounce and ultimately dispose of him. Can they induce him to revolutionary talk? 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one ... but teach in the way of God in accordance with the truth'. Tell us, then, 'is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' (Mark 12.14) Can they entice him into blasphemy? Tell us, by what authority do you do these things? Or into sin against the Law of Moses? Tell us, if, according to the Law of Moses, a man's widow marries his brother, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? (Mark 12.23) This is speech weaponised in service of power and its maintenance. These debates aren't about discerning the issue under discussion or uncovering the truth of Jesus' vision of God – they're about wedging and entrapping him. It sounds a lot like Question Time in Parliament House.

Imagine, then, the relief it must have been for Jesus, to be spoken to in a different spirit. After all this, writes Mark, one of the scribes came near; he doesn't seem to represent a faction, he's just a person approaching another. This scribe, our text says, heard them disputing with one another, and he saw that Jesus answered well. As a scribe – remember he's one of the teachers of Israel – it seems he was

¹ Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p.135.

genuinely interested in how this well-spoken rabbi interpreted fundamental questions of their tradition. So he asked an honest question. ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Scholar Bonnie Thurston writes: ‘Behind [this] question stands the fact that, by the first century, rabbis counted 613 individual statutes in the law and differentiated between those that were “heavy” and those that were “light”. So it was no small matter to decide if there were one basic principle in the law’.² Which commandment of the 613 commandments is the first of all?

Jesus begins his answer with the incredibly beautiful words of the Shema, ‘the Jewish confession of faith that was used at the beginning of morning and evening prayer in the temple ... and daily in the prayers of pious Jews’.³ ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’. It’s a powerful and traditional expression of Israel’s essential vocation. And then, says Thurston, Jesus gives this scribe a bonus – his view of the second most important of the commandments, to love your neighbour as yourself.⁴ Says Jesus, ‘There is no other commandment greater than these’.

This vision of the two greatest commandments was not unique to Jesus; other rabbis interpreted the tradition similarly at that time,⁵ just as the rabbi Paul (for example) could so easily conclude in his letter to the Romans that ‘one who loves another has fulfilled the law’. The commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder or steal or covet, ‘and any other commandment’, says Paul, ‘are summed up by this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law’ (Rom. 13.8-10). And the scribe in our passage doesn’t seem surprised by Jesus’ response either: ‘You are right, Teacher’, he says, you have spoken truly. And then (as in any real conversation) he builds on Jesus’ words. This love of God and neighbour, remarks our scribe, is ‘much

² Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.137.

³ Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.137.

⁴ Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.138.

⁵ Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, p.138.

more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices', more important than the paraphernalia of temple slaughter and ritual purity. Which was a gutsy thing to say, given that they're speaking in that very temple precinct.

But then, at this point, there seems a subtle shift in the conversational dynamic. Throughout these so-called 'controversies', it's Jesus' understanding that's been on trial; and even in this dialogue, the scribe has taken the lead, assumed the prerogative of questioner. But now, Jesus responds as if it's been the other way round: 'When Jesus saw that he answered wisely', writes Mark, 'he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God"' (Mark 12. 24). As if he has authority to say that! As if all along, it's not Jesus but his interlocutors who have been on trial; and, in the case of those powerful factional figures, it's they who have judged. Their hypocrisy, expediency and lack of integrity has been uncovered by the manner of their approach and motive. Their positions notwithstanding, it's become plain that *they're* the ones who don't speak for God and who lack all authority. Little wonder, writes Mark, that 'After that, no one dared to ask him any questions'.

'Love is the fulfilling of the law'; it's the meaning of life, the vocation of us all. Jesus shows that any purportedly religious person who lacks love is deluding themselves about their piety. He shows too that without truthfulness we do not love. Without honesty about motives, integrity in relationships and commitment to discerning and speaking of reality, we do damage. So any purportedly religious person who is self-deceived, double-minded or weaponising discourse for their own ends is deluding themselves about their piety.

Tomorrow begins perhaps the most consequential gathering of global leaders in the history of humanity. COP26 has been described as our last and best effort to set a framework for mitigating the consequences of runaway global heating, already proving catastrophic for our most vulnerable neighbours – human and other-than-human. In other words, we're getting to the pointy end of climate action. And still there are those who, wedded to their own power and its maintenance, refuse God's call to love their neighbour and cloak their destructiveness in the pseudo-pieties of

pragmatism, statistical manipulation and the rhetoric of having 'a plan'. Some claim to be Christian, just as the self-serving power-brokers in the Jerusalem of Jesus' day thought of themselves as good Jews.

But love is the test. Love is the fulfilling of the law, and those who say they love God (wrote St John), but do not love their brothers and sisters, are liars (1 John 4.20). And those who systematically lie to their brothers and sisters, do not love. Jesus incarnates the uncompromising love of God for the world and for God's people and creatures everywhere. His love reveals where falseness, hypocrisy and violence lurk behind pious platitudes, conventional religiosity and social respectability. We are his followers. So, in these critical times in the life of earth, may we too be fired by God's love, incandescent with God's truth, and fierce with reality.