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Discerning Trust (Matthew 22. 15-33)
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Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to say and ask and do these things? Why should we trust you? The reading we just heard is part of a lengthy meditation in the gospel of Matthew on these questions concerning Jesus.

All along there's been this niggle. Matthew, writing for a community of Jewish Christians, needs to account for the failure of traditional authorities to recognise and acknowledge him. Again and again, Matthew portrays various leaders puzzling over Jesus, challenging him, questioning and debating him. By this point in the gospel, interrogation of his meaning has become acute. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem in a way that deliberately enacted the words of the prophet Zechariah, who had promised that Zion's king would enter the city in mock triumph, 'humble and riding on a donkey' (Zech. 9.9; Matt. 21.5). James Alison, when he visited us a few weeks ago, drew out the point. Jesus is behaving publicly as if he's the heir of David, the promised Messiah come among his people. Which means that, in effect, he's deliberately provoking a crisis, a point at which those around him must decide who they think he is and choose where they will stand in relation to him. Is he the real thing? Or some kind of imposter? The chief priests and elders demand he give an answer: 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (Matt. 21. 23).

So far, Jesus has responded to this question by speaking in parables – the parables of the two sons, of the wicked tenants and wedding banquet – each of which challenged his interlocutors to consider how they relate to his presence and to see themselves in a different light. But now the authorities attempt a more direct challenge to Jesus, as if they're trying to regain control of the agenda. Except, there's something almost comical in the way they're said come up with their trick questions,

their attempted 'gotcha' moments. One after another different groups try their luck, like so many journalists at a press conference. First the Pharisees combine with a bunch of Herodians (Matt. 22. 15-16). Later, the same day some Sadducees roll up (Matt. 22. 23), and next week's reading will continue in the same vein. 'When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him' (Matt. 22. 34-35). Until finally, Jesus cuts the conference short by responding one final, unanswerable time.

History, we're told, is written by the victors. And although Matthew's Christian community couldn't be considered exactly *victorious* at the time the gospel was written, it's nevertheless clear whose side we're supposed to be on. James Alison remarked that we tend to have a 'Wily Coyote' view of the Pharisees. They're always trying to blow Jesus up (like the Road Runner) but they only ever manage to detonate themselves. The danger in this portrayal, as James noted, is that we fail to take seriously the legitimacy of their concern, or give them credit for truly caring about the integrity of their tradition.

But it must be said, Matthew actively encourages such a picture. The authorities are described explicitly by Jesus as being malicious and hypocritical. On Matthew's account, they don't really care about discovering the truth, so much as scoring political and religious points – for that's what will serve their real (if unacknowledged) ends. And if that is what's happening in the gospel, it leads me to wonder, what might we learn from Jesus' response? For we too live in a time where questioning and speaking are routinely weaponised, deployed in service of undeclared ends. How does Jesus act in the face of such hostility and bad faith? And what does he require of those who participate in and witness these exchanges?

The first thing that strikes me in the text is how Jesus remains present to his interlocutors. The Pharisees plot to entrap him by joining with the Herodians in a question about taxes to the emperor. This is an unlikely and unholy alliance. There were key differences between these two factions that should have meant their aims were radically inconsistent. The Pharisees resented paying taxes to Rome. They

expected anyone worthy of a claim to Jewish kingship would not only oppose the tax but replace Caesar as king, thus abolishing the tax altogether. The Herodians, on the other hand, supported Rome's puppet king Herod and accepted the authority bestowed on him. From their point of view, anyone who said taxes should *not* be paid to Rome, could be arrested and executed for sedition. The Pharisees and Herodians, in other words, would have completely disagreed about an acceptable answer to the question they posed – but in the context, their interest in the answer was secondary to their shared aim of discrediting Jesus.

So how does he respond? He addresses first, not the question, but the spirit of those who ask it: 'Why are you putting me to the test?' And even when he does begin to answer, it's as if he continues primarily to address *them* rather than what they've said. In fact, twice the text says: 'Then he said to them'. Focused on what's really going on rather than getting entangled in their spurious pretext, he finds a way of defusing the trap. Similarly, with the Sadducees and their 'how many angels can dance on a pinhead' question about marriage in the resurrection. Again 'Jesus answered *them*' and thus was able to address himself, not to the argumentative details of their theological conundrum, but to their fundamental misapprehension of reality. Resurrection is not an idea, but the conviction, the knowing that death cannot break relationship with the living God. From this awareness, this place of live relation, all theological questions look different and many show themselves to be completely beside the point. 'You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God'.

'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (Matt. 21. 23) Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita has written: 'We say of some people that they have something to say on moral or spiritual matters, but we do not mean that they have information to impart or a theory to propound'. Rather, 'To have something to say [in these matters] is to be "present" in what we say and to those to whom we are speaking, and that means that what we say must, at the crux, be taken on trust'.¹ When Jesus is asked to account for himself, he

¹ Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2004), p.268.

doesn't get hung up on proving his cleverness, parading his credentials, giving reasons. Rather, he asks those around him to be truly present to him, and then to be responsible for their response, to answer for themselves, to discern him and the life that happens around him.

But how do they, how does anyone, become capable of this kind of attention, and so of discerning the trustworthiness of a person like him, an invitation like his? From the point of view of the gospels, the tragedy of first century Judaism is that the long-awaited Messiah has come, and the very people whose job it was to discern him failed to recognise him. Was that failure *just* because it didn't suit their self-interest? Or was it also because they were unable, incapable of seeing? In his poem, 'Emerging', poet R.S. Thomas speaks to the difficulty of recognising the presence of God, the invitations to fuller life, in the midst of the ordinary. And that's because God occurs wrapped in normality, in matter, in the speech of daily life.

We are beginning to see
now it is matter is the scaffolding
of spirit; that the poem emerges
from morphemes and phonemes; that
as form in sculpture is the prisoner
of the hard rock, so in everyday life
it is the plain facts and natural happenings
that conceal God and reveal him to us
little by little under the mind's tooling.

And it seems to me it's this last phrase – 'the mind's tooling' – that offers a clue. It's often said we face a crisis of trust in our society. Experiences of institutional failure, betrayal and corruption in almost every sphere have led many to be cynical and suspicious of authority in general – to the great detriment, as we know, of functioning democracy and civil discourse. Yet, on the other hand, we live in a context where more and more people seem willing to put their trust in charlatans and conspiracists, in fake news and demagogues, seemingly incapable of spotting the difference between imposters and the 'real thing'. How do we discern an invitation

to trust? What capacities must we cultivate in ourselves to be capable of trusting worthily?

This is the significance of ‘the mind’s tooling’ – the necessary formation of mind and heart if we’re to be capable of recognising the deeper contours of reality. Gaita says that serious moral thought involves the disciplined effort to be un sentimental, lucid, honest and present. Understanding in ethical matters, he says, is ‘the expression of a life’² and to grow in discernment and truth necessarily involves a process of personal integration, and growth in self-knowledge, humility, attention and compassion. It’s only in deepening our own integrity and authenticity that we can better sense when something or someone is off-key and become aware of the real fruits of speech and action – not just the obvious measurable fruits, but the subtler climate surrounding a person, community, an institution or nation.

Many of us have been profoundly saddened this past week, not just at the failure of the Referendum, but the manner of its defeat – by what seems an unholy alliance of self-interest, apathy and fear, of deliberate untruth and a widespread refusal of responsibility. Many of us are shocked and desolated by what all this reveals about the ‘tooling’ of our common mind. It feels as if there’s been a catastrophic collective failure to discern what we were actually being asked and to recognise the invitation actually offered.

Jesus too was denied recognition. The majority failed truly to discern him. ‘He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’, as the writer of John’s gospel puts it (John 1.11). Yet ‘to all who received him, who trusted in him, he gave power to become children of God’, which is to say he gave power to bear with him God’s clarity and meaning and suffering for the land. As we mourn the sorrows of our hearts and of all our grieving world, may we yet place our trust in this goodness and presence to be our comfort and our guide.

² Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p.282.