

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Sometimes, in arguments, we are not arguing for the sake of an idea, but arguing for the sake of winning. Or, arguing for the sake of condemning, or castigating, or exiling, or worse.

Today's text — from the 22nd chapter of Matthew's gospel — is a culmination of encounters. As mentioned last week, Jesus has already cast traders from the temple, making way for those in need. The authorities question his authority and he asks them a question about how they measure authority. They can't answer. Jesus tells parables about a son who initially refused to work, but changed his mind, a landlord whose tenants turned violent, a king who invited many to a wedding banquet... Jesus is raising tension, in this most important of cities leading up to this most important of times.

In popular descriptions of Jesus, he is named as a Prince of Peace. However, he is also a Stirrer of Trouble. And here, he demonstrates that he is not afraid of conflict, in fact, sometimes he heightens it. He was confident in his intellectual capacity, and confident, also, that intellectual capacity must serve something useful, rather than just determine dominance.

Text

Matthew 22:34-46

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. "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 neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."

He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet' ' ?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Comment

This text is best read in conversation with the chapters that have come before it. Jesus — in Matthew's telling — has arrived in Jerusalem, and his presence there causes tensions about authority to rise. Not a shy bunny, he has cleared the temple of trade in order to make space for those who wish to use the temple for prayer; mostly people excluded from the halls of the holy. This gives rise to a number of encounters where Jesus' authority is questioned. Where is his authority from? However, many of these encounters don't come with the plain-speaking enquiries that seem to open Jesus to conversation; rather they come as traps.

It is worthwhile considering — whether for your own reflection, group or congregational reflection — on the following:

What evoked Jesus' respect?

And, another way of asking the same question:

What irritated Jesus?

The latter seems easier to answer, I think. He seemed to get annoyed with power games; with authority whose only purpose was to serve itself; with addictions to comparison; with piety that is allergic to parties; with encounters that are based on proving prowess (intellectual, masculine, national) rather than anything else.

The first question is more difficult. These days, the way I think of it is that Jesus gave respect to people who were not afraid to name their need. When a person came to him with genuine query, or critique, or naming a story, or naming a need, he seemed to respond in the most curious and creative of ways.

So how could today's text be summarised, and — perhaps — re-imagined?

The Pharisees (and remember that in the telling of Matthew, it's entirely likely that Jesus himself is being presented as a pharisee; his critique wasn't about being a pharisee, his critique of the pharisees was more that they weren't being the best Pharisees) hear that Jesus has intellectually defeated the Sadducees, so they want to defeat him. They come up with a little game about the greatest commandment. Except it's not a game, it's a trap.

What was the trap?

The Pharisees had divided the well-known 248 commandments of the Torah — and the 365 prohibitions — into different categories. Not that they excused even the smallest infraction, but rather in order to underline basic principles of the Torah. For example, if you were facing martyrdom, there were basic Torah principles that even in this most strenuous of circumstances you could not break. They were asking Jesus a question of how he would describe the holding together of all the law. They asked him a singular question "Which commandment in the Torah is the greatest?" He gave them two answers: one from Deuteronomy (Deut 6:5) and another from Leviticus (Lev 19:18). The second answer is interesting, because he wasn't asked for two. He ties the question of loving God with loving neighbour. Love, in this context, was not abstract, but deeply concrete. And for him — over and over and over in Matthew's presentation — he is expanding the imagination of who the neighbour is.

Jesus' answer astounds them, because they, too, have been engaged in an intellectual conversation about how best to summarise the basic principles that underpin all the Torah. And Jesus' response is to offer a twinning of verses, rather than a singular verse, that the underpinning approach to all the law is based on holding two things in tension so that each can reveal the other, rather than in a game of supremacy.

No wonder they were astonished.

His conversation about David deserves equal discussion, but, in many ways, is a continuance of him saying that his is not a practice that undermines the authority

of the text, but that uses the text to deepen love.

This is the main point.

Knowing a religious text is not enough. Knowing the centuries of arguments about how to interpret the religious text is also not enough. Incorporating a text, and its interpretation, into a daily life where love is the aim — love of God and love of neighbour; a neighbour who might even be an enemy — *that* is the enough. And it will stretch you.

Jesus heightens tension by proving himself perfectly capable of tricking the trick questioners. He deepens it by showing his intellectual prowess. He causes his questioners to be foiled, and — indeed — awed. And in all of this, he points to the question of love, showing that love of God is *shown* in the audacity of love for those who might even be enemies.

Response

We see that Jesus sometimes gets irritated and throws a question back to undermine the imaginations of people who were setting traps.

Are there times when we set traps for people?

In this imagination, who wins? What is the prize?

What is the cost? – whether of winning or losing?

What might it be like to consider what love — real, muscular, intellectual, robust, embodied love — looks like in this context?

Prayer

Jesus where some people saw winning
you saw the stories of everyone who'd lost before.

And while you could easily win
you most often pointed towards
the populations who'd been excluded.

You became excluded.
And are excluded still.

Gather us all in the corners of exclusion
so that we can learn what really matters,
and set aside traps and threats and executions.

Because you were threatened, trapped and executed
and even this did not deter you
from what was most
important.

Love, you said, love.

Love of God and love of neighbour, love.
Love of enemy too. And earth.
And all living things that live upon the earth.
Love.

Amen.

Further Reading

The magnificent book 'In Quest of the Historical Pharisees' (Neusner & Chilton, eds) is a very helpful guide into this grouping of people who are so often categorised as the *foil* in gospel literatures. Published in 2007 by Baylor University Press, it's a wise insight into the Pharisees – people who are often spoken of, but rarely considered in their own right.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Argument and Anger