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Introduction

Have you ever experienced 'entrapment' or being 'set up' for another's gain? What was it like? How did you respond? In this passage, we watch Jesus responding to questions designed to trap him, set by the Pharisees who, in the end, leave, 'amazed.'

Text

Matthew 22:15 – 22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Comment

There's a beautiful, relatively modern Martial Art called Aikido, where the power of the enemy is used constructively and creatively, and incisively, to move the situation forward from one of danger to one of hope and possibility. The one challenged takes the energy of the challenger and turns it into a force for good. The art is learned over years, a lifetime. It is honed in combat and in practice sessions, and is mirrored with the art of meditation and a stilling of the body's core, to meet aggression with calmness.

The art of facilitating conflict transformation is not unlike the art of aikido.

Anger, aggression, fear is met – indeed moved towards with love. These negative emotions are then embraced, explored and transformed into energy for good, for peace and for right relationships.

In this passage Jesus is met with thinly disguised rage, served with a veneer of sugar-coating. The sleight of hand, malice, rage and jealousy of the Pharisees pours from their mouths cloaked in the syrup of right ordering, law, and false humility. Jesus' response is three-fold:

1. Recognise it for what it is: how did Jesus know this was a trap, a malicious action designed to deceive and silence him? Past experience stored in our bodies and in our memories alerts us to danger and our senses are heightened; the ability to cut through extraneous and diverting tactics and to recognize 'truth' for what it is comes to the fore. At the same time, living in fear, trepidation or anxiety can release responses that are inappropriate, or disproportionate. So finding a way to stay calm in the midst of storm, to stay centred, and focused in the midst of aggression can help us to respond from a place of love. This takes practice. How do I know that my raised heart-beat, or the hairs standing up on the back of my neck mean 'watch out', or 'take care'? When should I act on instinct, and when should I act on cool thought? Practicing stilling prayer, meditation, deep breathing – even counting to 10 – can be a good way to begin the art of focused response.,

2. Respond in tough, fierce love: when we are outnumbered, and challenged, and in danger or are fearful, the temptation could be 'fight' or 'flight'. Natural human instincts can be to hit back, to fight back, either verbally or physically, by 'giving as good as we get', or 'meeting like with like.' Or our instincts can tell us to flee, to 'run for our lives', to get ourselves out of the way of danger. Both responses are legitimate, and either can be necessary if in the face of mortal danger. But it can also be possible to respond by holding fast, finding a focus, and moving towards the fear of the other. Jesus holds fast, doesn't fight or flee – but neither does he submit. His response is steadfast, fierce love.

3. Move through the anger: This can be a risky strategy. One understanding of fierce love, is to look the 'other' in the eye and speak truth to power. Jesus takes the question of taxes, and passes it back to the Pharisees as a gift, a challenge. He takes the energy of the one setting the trap, and turns it into a force for good for all – throwing their words up in the air to rain down on them as a gossamer thin veil of opportunity and new insight, should they choose to embrace it.

Jesus' journey into Jerusalem threatens the identity of the religious leaders – their history, their existence, their sense of belonging. Unarmed, he is a lethal weapon of destruction in their eyes. How are they to counter-attack? They use the weapon of words and questions of entrapment to lure Jesus. Jesus in turn uses their power to move forward, turning the questions of right ordering into a cosmic question of deeper belonging and wider identity. This catches the Pharisees out: they are 'amazed'. And they leave.

Response

- Imagine you were Jesus. What might your initial gut response to this situation have been?
- How would you know that you were being 'set up'? Would your body give you any indications e.g. raised heart-beat, hairs rising on the back of your neck, sweaty palms.....
- What's your own experience of entrapment?
- Can you register the feelings that you might have in this situation?
- What political system would you challenge today?
- Frame an open question for your local MP or Church Leader about something that matters to you.

Prayer

Loving God,

in these days of sleek communication

and glitch-free public presentations

remind us of the power of being human;

where emotion and instinct

cut through mealy-mouthed words

to a truth that sets us free.

Amen