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Introduction

Jesus is journeying deeper into the culture of the Pharisees and the leaders of the church. In the process, they are engaging him in questions designed to trap, to ensnare. Jesus responds with more questions, which ultimately silence the Pharisees. Consider the art of formulating a good question – one that does the opposite of entrapping: one that frees, that draws others out, that liberates, that opens up possibilities. These are the types of questions honed and practiced by peace-makers around the world.

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

“Questions, questions, nothing but questions
once they start they never stop.
How does the jam get into a doughnut?
How do you make a weasel pop?”

(from 'Questions, Questions' by Leon Rosselson)

In this passage, following on from the questioning of Jesus by the leaders in the previous verses, we are led into a deeper exchange of questions – some designed to trap, some designed to free.

After replying to the question of the Pharisees about the law, Jesus then offers his own questions back – a 'testing' question, if you like, mirroring their own 'question to test him.' The response to Jesus test is silence, as it was ultimately from the Saducees at the end of the reflection from last week. Twice Jesus, through his questions, has reduced the leaders to silence. This time though, their questioning was brought to a halt: 'nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.'

The power of questions is immense. I can remember times when a child's question has brought me to a standstill. Delivered in one breath from the mouth of a three year old: 'Mummy, what happens when I die? Was I alive before I was born? Will my dolly die when I die?'

The power of a one-word question, often on the lips of a young person, such as 'why?' is enormous. Questions can probe, affirm, destroy or enlighten. There are many different types of questions, so choosing the correct style of question for your situation, the best tone, the right words is a crucial task in life, and one that is particularly relevant in the art of conflict transformation.

A 'closed' question, which offers only a 'yes' or a 'no' response can be direct and powerful, whereas an 'open' question (beginning with 'how...', or 'what...', or 'why...' or 'can you tell me more about...') invites a more full response. A 'probing' question might test out a number of options. And there are other types of questions: hypothetical, rhetorical, focused....

In this text Jesus is offered a 'testing question' – a question designed to trip him up, to continue the entrapment initiated by those who feel most threatened by him. This is a leading question, designed to snare him with its foregone conclusion. He manages to avoid the trap, by including in his response deeper reflections, and further testing questions.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is to point them to what we now know as 'The Golden Rule' – an ethic, and a way of living shared by all the major world religions: "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." This response is a gift to those of us involved in the work of conflict transformation: for in order to love our neighbor, first we must know what it means to love ourselves.

Henri Nowen in his book 'The Wounded Healer' talks of the art of healing being born out of the healer's own ability to recognize their own wounded-ness. In acknowledging our own inner journey, we are more able to empathise with the 'other', and so bring healing. This takes a degree of patience with oneself, and desire to be self-reflective. So too, in order to understand the conflict, or wounds in another, a mediator must spend time reflecting on how we ourselves respond to conflict: what triggers does conflict release in us? By so doing, we become 'reconciling reconcilers', willing to remain on a journey of life-long learning and to continue to seek inner reconciliation with ourselves, with God and with others.

At the heart of this passage, where we could be distracted by a war of words and questions designed for quarrel, we are offered one of the gems of the Gospel: love of self, of God, of neighbour is the key.

Response

Take time to consider your use of questions. Do you vary your tone, style, length? Consider pausing after receiving a question, to allow the question to have an

impact on you. Resist the temptation to reply immediately. Reflect on how this feels. Practice the art of 'creative listening', where you empty your mind of as many of your own thoughts as possible as you consider what the other is saying. This is called involves 'stilling the voice in your head.' Consider times when this style of listening is essential, and times when a free-form style of conversation with no such silences is preferable. Notice how you use silence in a variety of conversations, depending on the tone and the content.

Prayer

Oh God, you search me and you know me –
you know me in my deepest longings
and in my most fierce passions;
you know me in my loneliness
and in my saddest times.

I confess the times of silences between us –
when I am distracted
when I don't listen
when I am afraid
when I turn from you.

I celebrate the times of silence between us –
when I wait expectantly
when we are content with each other's presence
when I ponder a prompt that puzzles me.

In the silences and the questions that we share, dear lover God,
I give thanks for your desire not to trap,
but to free each soul in order
to make this world a peaceful place for all.

Amen