

Matthew 22: 34-46 Love your neighbour

In our gospel reading this morning we see the Pharisees having one last go at trying to trap Jesus with a couple of questions they thought he wouldn't be able to answer. Just before this passage the Sadducees had attempted to trap him with a question about resurrection, but they have obviously failed because Jesus once again gives them a brilliant answer. By the way, if you want to know something of what your own resurrected life will be like, it is really worth taking a look sometime at what Jesus tells us in Matthew 22: 23-33.

Pharisees & Sadducees

All throughout this section of Matthew's Gospel we see the Pharisees and Sadducees trying to trap Jesus, and it was quite unusual for these two groups to co-operate with each other in such a way, a bit like our own coalition government. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the ruling classes of Israel. The Sadducees tended to be wealthy, people who held powerful positions, and they held the majority of the seats in the ruling council of the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees were not popular with the ordinary people, because they often agreed with the Roman occupiers and they seemed to be more concerned with politics than being true to their religious

identity. In contrast the Pharisees were more popular with ordinary people, even though Jesus often condemns them for their strict observance of the Law. They held less seats than the Sadducees in the Sanhedrin, but they tended to hold more power due to their popularity.

Surprisingly there were huge differences in what the Sadducees and Pharisees believed, which is why we don't often see them collaborating. The Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife or in the resurrection of the dead, hence their question to Jesus about resurrection. It is said the Sadducees were extremely 'self-sufficient' to the point where they denied God's involvement with everyday life. On the other hand, the Pharisees understood God to have much more of an influence in everyday life, they had a greater spiritual depth to their belief and they believed in an afterlife and resurrection.

Matthew's Gospel

In Matthew's Gospel this is the last time Jesus is questioned by his opponents until the time of his trial and we get a real sense of them giving up, they have done all they can to trap and question Jesus. They have thrown every awkward question at him they can think of and unsurprisingly he has answered every one of those questions

with deep godliness and integrity, and that's why they failed to catch him out. That is a huge contrast to what we see on our televisions or hear on our radios when our political leaders are questioned in relation to their own policies. Our politicians are masterful about ducking out of answering questions, even when all that is required is a basic yes or no answer. In some ways I can understand why they don't answer simple questions, but by them not providing a satisfactory answers, it very often comes across as a huge lack of integrity and perhaps that's why many people now fail to trust our politicians. I often get frustrated by a politicians inability to answer simple questions, but I admit I also find it a source of entertainment when they struggle to find ways of avoiding the answer.

Questions

We often ask each other questions for all sorts of reasons. We tend to greet each other saying, "Hello, how are you?" out of genuine concern. Someone travelling might ask "What time is the next train to Leeds?" in order to help them with their journey. A doctor often assesses a patient's condition by asking "Where does it hurt? What kind of pain is it? and When does it hurt the most?" Questions are sometimes asked to test our knowledge, sometimes for fun like a pub quiz and sometimes in more serious contexts like exams or job interviews. In these latter cases we may have to think hard about

the question in order to work out what information is being sought. But examining bodies or potential employers on the whole probably don't ask "trick" questions. They are not deliberately trying to catch people out, they just want to delve deep into their experience and knowledge. I'm a fan of The Apprentice, I love to see how common sense often gets put to one side and is superseded by sheer ambitious determination, but I especially enjoy the boardroom bit when Lord Sugar questions the candidates on their performance. He's not trying to catch them out, even though he has some insider knowledge from Nick and Karen, but rather he is always trying to get the candidates to be truthful and honest about their performance, which they often fail to do because they are too busy protecting their egos.

Pharisees question

The question Jesus faces from the Pharisees in our gospel passage, isn't a genuine question, it is asked with hostility in the hope of tricking him into giving a response that can lead to a charge against him, in either Jewish law or in civil Roman law. On the face of it the question is straightforward: "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" It was not unusual for the rabbis to discuss the relative importance of all the commandments contained in the Hebrew scriptures, after all there were 613 such

commandments all with varying degrees seriousness. But there's a catch, even though some of them were not regarded as being serious, it was believed that all of the commandments were equally binding. (*Jesus often talks about a heavy yoke and that is what he is referring to the heavy binding nature of the Jewish Law.*) So, if Jesus suggested that one command takes precedence over another he could be accused of rejecting the seriousness of the whole Law.

Shema

Without giving any indication, Jesus spots the trap of the loaded question and he answers in a very traditional way. He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5 "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is part of the "Shema" a twice daily prayer which was, and still is used by devout Jews today. He then links that verse from Deuteronomy with the second part of a verse from Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," and he finishes off his answer by saying that all the Law hangs on these two commands. So, with those two very familiar commands quoted directly from Hebrew scripture, Jesus cleverly sums up all the Law and gives the Pharisees an answer they can't argue with. Those two commandments underpin all of the others by providing a guiding principle to be applied when

interpreting the Law, and the guiding principle which overrides all of the others is to love God and neighbour.

It's a shame the Pharisees felt beaten by the answer and didn't want to enter into a real debate with Jesus about the implications of summarising the Law in such a simple way, it would have been a fascinating conversation if they had only opened their hearts and minds to what he was saying. What might they have learnt? But more importantly what can we draw today from the answer Jesus gave to those Pharisees?

Perhaps

Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to take a holistic approach to our faith. He is inviting us to become fully integrated people whose hearts, minds and souls are all working together and directed towards knowing and loving God more and more each day, just as he loves us beyond anything we have ever known.

Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to think about the difference between following a set of rules and laws instead of following the commandments of love, which is in fact an invitation to find freedom in God's way of living, a way which means we can be free from the burden of a heavy yoke.

Perhaps Jesus is reminding us that God creates us in his image and therefore the image of the divine is ever present in us and in all our neighbours. The commandment to love God cannot be separated from the commandment to love others and to treat everyone, without exception, just as we ourselves would wish to be treated.

Perhaps Jesus is challenging us to be really open and honest with each other and to grow in real depth as a community, so when someone asks how you are, rather than doing that English thing and putting on a brave face, you could share with one another what is really going on in your life and through that openness and honesty we begin to build real trust, concern and love for each other.

Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that we need to think about the balance in our lives: the way we are influenced by the things around us, the way we busy ourselves with our own priorities, rather than concentrating on the priorities God sets before us, of knowing him with all our heart, soul and mind.

Whatever Jesus is saying to us, he is calling for some kind of unwavering loyalty to God in all that we do and asking us to offer ourselves to him so that he can draw us ever closer to his own perfect heart of love.