

Sunday 20th February 2022

Mark 11:27 – 12:40

Jesus and Questions about Authority

I want to press on with our series in Mark's Gospel – despite all the frustrating interruptions. A reminder, we're asking ourselves two key questions: Jesus' *personal* question to his disciples, "Who do you say I am?"; and the natural follow up question, "What difference does who he is make to your life?" I'm hoping we can reach the appropriate passages for Easter, so please bear with a long passage today, from Mark 11:27 – 12:40. This follows immediately on from Jesus clearing the temple of the animal vendors and money-changers.

[Read Mark 11:27 – 12:40]

11:27 They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. 28 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you authority to do this?'

29 Jesus replied, 'I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 30 John's baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!'

31 They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will ask, "Then why didn't you believe him?" 32 But if we say, "Of human origin" . . .' (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

33 So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.'

Jesus said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

12:1 Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 2 At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. 3 But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. 5 He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

6 He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son."

7 But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." 8 So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

9 What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10 Haven't you read this passage of Scripture:

*"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;*

*11 the Lord has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes?"'*

12 Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. 14 They came to him and said, 'Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the poll-tax to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn't we?'

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. 'Why are you trying to trap me?' he asked. 'Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.' 16They brought the coin, and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?'

'Caesar's,' they replied.

17Then Jesus said to them, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.'

And they were amazed at him.

18Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. 19'Teacher,' they said, 'Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. 20Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. 21The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. 22In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. 23At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?'

24Jesus replied, 'Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?'

25When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

26Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? 27He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!'

28One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'

29'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." 31The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.'

32'Well said, teacher,' the man replied. 'You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.'

34When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

35While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, 'Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? 36David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

"The Lord said to my Lord:

'Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.'"

37David himself calls him "Lord". How then can he be his son?'

The large crowd listened to him with delight.

38As he taught, Jesus said, 'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the market-places, 39and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. 40They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.'

[Pray]

I have an announcement to make. Having once received a parking ticket for leaving my car unattended in Trinity Place for 5 minutes with a note on the dashboard to say I was unloading into Trinity, I have decided that from today there shall be a 10-minute grace period for anyone stopping there to gain quick access into the church. And I will write to the council to let them know! ... But I won't really do that, because the truth is that such a letter would be worth as much as Neville Chamberlain's famous "piece of paper." The council and the traffic wardens would quite rightly ask, "By what authority are *you* doing this? Who gave *you* this authority?"

As presumptuous as that scenario seems, I believe Jesus' actions in clearing the Temple felt even more presumptuous to the Teachers of the Law. "By what authority are you doing this? Who gave you this authority? *We* run the Temple and *we* say the vendors and money-changers have a right to be there! Who do you think you are!?"

Of course, that is exactly the question we must answer. Who is this Jesus? Put simply, Jesus' question about John the Baptist's ministry is even more important when applied to his own: "was it from heaven or of human origin?" Or, to pick up Jesus' quote from Isaiah, did "the *Lord*" (God) make Jesus "the Cornerstone" or not? For, if his ministry was of his own making, then he was an imposter who had no right to do as he did; but if it *was* from *heaven*, then the Teachers of the Law were the imposters for opposing him and thereby opposing God.

Even more, we must address Jesus' closing question about the identity of David's son – a shorthand for the promised Messiah King. Why did great King David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, call his descendant "my *Lord*"? He must have seen this coming King as far greater than he! ... Indeed, David only had *one Lord* – God himself. Now, if Jesus is *God*, then the Teachers of the Law's challenge to *him* should really be directed the other way, "By what authority are *you* doing these things – desecrating *my Father's* Temple with your hypocrisy and exploitation? Who gave *you* this authority?"

There is an interesting power and status dynamic at work in these exchanges. By any normal *human* measure, the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law had all the power and status. They had the prestigious jobs, they were rich, they were renowned as experts on God's word, and Scripture itself endorsed priestly authority. Yet twice we read that they "*feared* the people" or "*were afraid* of the crowd." In reality, fear rendered them vulnerable and weak. So, why did the people's opinion matter so much to them?

Perhaps a clue lies in the fact that, unlike the Aaronic Priests of the Old Testament, Caiaphas and his Sadducean family were not chosen by *God* as Chief Priests. Rather, the Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Caiaphas was appointed High Priest by the *Roman* procurator Valerius Gratus. In exchange they were expected to use their status to assist Rome in retaining control over the Jews. So, their position was precarious. *If* the Jewish populace rebelled (as they were wont to do) then the procurator would likely remove Caiaphas from office, as he had done to a number of his predecessors. From the limited evidence we have in the Bible and in Josephus' writings, it seems that Caiaphas chose the path of material wealth and worldly power over faithfulness to God and his Word. Power can so easily corrupt. There are few people like Billy Graham or Desmond Tutu, who can have the ear of high political leaders yet retain their godly integrity. But the truth is that the temptation is there for all of us to give in to worldly ways for the sake of personal advancement.

But Jesus was scathing in his condemnation of such behaviour. He exposed the Chief Priests' lack of integrity with just one question about John the Baptist. He likened them, like many before them, to vineyard tenants who would kill their landlord's servants and even his beloved son for their own greed – the last a clear exposé of what

they would soon do to *him*. He called out their hypocrisy in trying to trap him with their smooth-tongued aggressive questions. He skilfully refuted their erroneous Scriptural interpretation that neither paid heed to what the Bible actually says, nor honoured God's power, in denying the coming resurrection. And he laid bare their heartless exploitation of the weak and needy to further their own power. Clearly, in Jesus' eyes, such a leader forfeits the right to authority over God's people.

But Jesus clearly did *not* encourage insubordination or rebellion against *legitimate* authority. God is a God of order, not chaos. And, repeatedly in Scripture, God views a challenge to human authority as rebellion against *him*. An insubordinate spirit is a *sinful* spirit. As God's people, we are called to "submit ... *for the Lord's sake to every human authority,*" whether we agree with them or not (1 Peter 2:13).

So, in the course of these discourses, Jesus endorsed four different authorities. Firstly, he implicitly supported the authority of God's appointed *prophets* – like John the Baptist. They carry authority because they are sent by God. Then Jesus' parable clearly articulated God's *own* authority over Israel (*his vineyard*); the Teachers of the Law were mere *tenants*, whom he entrusted with caring for his vineyard in the expectation of reaping the fruit of righteousness. But *God* has authority over them as their *owner*, and Jesus Christ as his beloved *Son*. By killing Jesus, they would demonstrate the utter depravity of their worldly religion.

Thirdly, and shockingly, Jesus endorsed *Caesar's* right to exercise political authority over his Empire, including raising taxes. The Jews hated paying Roman taxes because they were a constant reminder that they remained a subject people. Thus, there was considerable potential risk to Jesus' popularity if he supported paying taxes, and risk of his arrest by the Romans if he opposed paying them. Jesus answered skilfully, *affirming* the institution of governmental authority, whilst also hinting at *limits* to it – Caesar can command what bears his image (his coins), but not what bears *God's* image (the human heart).

Fourthly, Jesus absolutely upheld the unchangeable authority of Scripture – the Bible. Firstly, in his fierce rebuttal of the Sadducees' error in their faithless scriptural interpretation and then, most clearly, in his statement about *David's* words: "David himself, *speaking by the Holy Spirit ...*" Jesus was clear: the Bible was not written out of its human authors' *own imagination*, but was inspired and co-authored by the Holy Spirit of God himself – *every word* of it. So, it must be revered and submitted to as it is – God's own word.

That leads to the one exchange in this sequence which carries a different tone. *One* Teacher of the Law asked a question, *not* in order to trap Jesus, but either to *sincerely* explore his credentials as a credible teacher, or perhaps even to *learn* from him: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" In response, Jesus summarised in a nutshell the primary thrust of the whole Old Testament Law. He began with the absolute affirmation that there is only *one* God, and continued, "Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind and with *all* your strength" and "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Love is the centre of God's heart and the goal of his entire Law – it's not a new concept that arrives in the New Testament. So, of any course of action, deed or word, we should ask ourselves, "Does this promote a love for God and a love for other people?" Though, as Ron said last week, we should not confuse love with unquestioning *acceptance* of everything someone does. True love calls people to repentance and to trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. And true love calls believers to holiness, because God has said, "Be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16), and "if you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15). Equally, true love does

ride roughshod over people's feelings for the sake of being "right." Love, after all, "is kind" among other qualities (1 Corinthians 13:4).

So, for example, when we discuss our surplus together next week, love for God and neighbour should govern both the *manner* of our discussions and the *outcomes* we discern to be God's will. Similarly, when at work or at home, love for God and neighbour means working with integrity as for the Lord, not for people, but also making time for those around us who need a bit of extra support. And, as David shared two weeks ago, ultimately, wherever we go, love for God and neighbour means respectfully sharing with people the wonderful truth that God loves them and sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world – which is why I would encourage all of us to attend the Christian Life and Witness Course.

You see, there is a slight edge to Jesus' response, even to *this* Teacher of the Law. Jesus recognised in him a sincere heart and desire to understand God's Word and to apply it to himself. But he did not say that was enough. Rather, he said, "You are not *far* from the kingdom of God." He was *close*, but not yet *in* the kingdom. Because the central piece of the puzzle was missing – he had not yet accepted Jesus himself as his *personal* Messiah.

And there may be someone here or watching, who is in the same position. You want to follow God and do his will, like this man, but for some reason you've never truly asked Jesus to forgive your sins and become your Saviour.

[Give opportunity for response]

But what about the rest of us? What do we need to hear this morning? Let's allow the Holy Spirit to examine us afresh. Perhaps we've been challenged about our attitude to authority – the authority of God's word, political or civil authority, church authority, authority in the home or at work. Perhaps we've been challenged about the extent of our love for God – has that waned or grown over the period of covid? Are we committed to living holy lives as Jesus commands? Or perhaps we've been challenged about our love for our neighbour. For instance, is there anyone to whom we need to apologise or whom we need to forgive? Do we love our neighbour enough to seek for opportunities to tell them about Jesus? We're going to respond with a song, but if God has been speaking to you today, please don't go without taking the time to pray through it with someone. Please come to the front at the end of the service if you want prayer about anything God has said, or if there's another need for which you need support, and someone from the prayer ministry team will come to you and pray with you. And, perhaps if there are people waiting, some of the deacons might be willing to pray with people too.

[Pray]