

## On whose authority? (Mark 11: 27-1:12)

### ***Jesus' Authority Is Questioned***

27 Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him <sup>28</sup>and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>30</sup>Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' <sup>31</sup>They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?"' <sup>32</sup>But shall we say, "Of human origin"?'—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. <sup>33</sup>So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

### ***The Parable of the Wicked Tenants***

12 Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. <sup>2</sup>When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. <sup>3</sup>But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>4</sup>And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. <sup>5</sup>Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. <sup>6</sup>He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." <sup>7</sup>But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." <sup>8</sup>So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. <sup>9</sup>What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. <sup>10</sup>Have you not read this scripture:  
"The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
<sup>11</sup> this was the Lord's doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes"?'

12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

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## Commentary

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem brings an immediate confrontation with the temple authorities – the "chief priests, scribes and elders". This is the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. According to Jeremias,

“After Judea became a Roman province in AD 6, the Sanhedrin was its chief political agency. A committee of the Sanhedrin was in charge of finance in the eleven Jewish [regions] into which the Romans had divided the land. Furthermore, the Sanhedrin was at that time the first communal court of justice in the province, and finally it was the highest Jewish court of law in all Judea” (Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969, p74)

The issue of authority revolves around divine authorization: whose understanding of God, God’s Law (Torah) and God’s will expresses God’s intentions and actions? That question, however, does not exist in some sort of “religious vacuum”. The burning question of the day – and therefore about Jesus’ own ministry and the opposition to it – is about the suffering of the Jewish people, and very particularly, the people most vulnerable to the enormous double tax burden levied by both the Romans (the Occupation Tax) and the temple authorities. When and what was God going to do to save them?

Both Jesus and the Baptist regarded the temple as having sold out to the Romans: they were part of the structures of oppression and exploitation that not only contributed to the misery of the people, but also justified it in God’s name. That is the significance of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, which Mark portrays as an exorcism: it is not that trade is taking place in the temple (which is necessary for sacrifice), but that it exploits the very least most ruthlessly. That is why the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist were such potential flash points: were these men both prophets sent from God, or false prophets that needed to be opposed and silenced in God’s name?

### **Challenge and counter-challenge (11:27-33)**

This is the context for the challenge to Jesus from the temple authorities (vv27-28). The Sanhedrin, who see themselves as the true earthly representatives of the temple, which is divinely legitimated from heaven, challenge Jesus to present his

credentials.

The context also shapes Jesus' response, which is to challenge the authorities about the origins of John's ministry (vv29-30). The point is clear: "the crowd" (ie the marginalized, oppressed and vulnerable populace) saw both Jesus and John as prophets sent by God; the temple authorities saw them both as dangerous revolutionaries who not only misled people about God but threatened the stability of the accommodation with Rome from which they so obviously benefited.

Jesus is making another, more serious point: because the temple authorities have sold out to the Roman Occupation in exchange for privilege, wealth and power, they are incapable of recognizing God at work. They see, in Jesus' gospel of the Kingdom, only a threat and loss. The gospel that is always Good News to "the least first" (the poor and marginalized) is Very Bad News indeed to the rich and powerful.

That is why they "fear the crowds" and are silenced by Jesus' own challenge. It is why they will plot "to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him" (14:1-2) and enlist the help of Judas (14:10-11). Like Judas, they are prepared to murder God's messiah in exchange for money.

### **The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (12: 1-12)**

Jesus goes on to expose their motivations in a parable. It is a devastating exposé of their lack of divine authority and resistance to God - the equivalent of the child's cry: "Look! The Emperor has no clothes!" Three points in the movement of the story underline Jesus' critique:

1. The tenants refuse the authority of the absentee landlord (who is, of course, God) and their contractual duties as his tenants by abusing and killing the servants sent by the landlord. This is Jesus' verdict on their "tenancy" of the temple.
2. The landlord has "a beloved son" (12:6). We have already heard from the very mouth of God at Jesus' baptism and Transfiguration that Jesus is "the

beloved Son”, and have been instructed unequivocally to “listen to him!” (9:7). This is the answer to the question of the source of Jesus’ authority.

3. The tenants reason that killing the landlord’s son will mean that the vineyard becomes theirs by legal right (12:7). This is because of the way in which the law worked with regard to absentee landowners: if the absentee landowner died without an heir, the tenants could legally claim the ownerless property. Jesus frames the parable to show that the tenants assume that the absentee landlord is dead, and that the “beloved son” has arrived to claim his own inheritance. They do not suppose for a minute that the son has been sent by his father. Imagine, then, their shock and horror when the landowner arrives to call the tenants to account (12:9)!

The parable is Jesus’ answer to the question of where divine authorization lies. The temple authorities are indeed *supposed* to be God’s representatives – the means by which God is present with the people. Instead, they have treated God as an “absentee landlord” and interpreted that apparent absence as licence to “work the system” to their own advantage. Their response to Jesus is a demonstration of their blindness: they effectively behave as though God is dead, rather than recognizing that where Jesus is, God is seen, heard, and touched. Jesus is, as Mark declares in the opening verse of his gospel, “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God!” And that is very Good News indeed!

#### **“The stone that the builders rejected ...” (12: 10-11)**

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is enormous. It contains not only Jesus’ tomb, but also the traditional site of Golgotha. Both have better historical claims to being the original sites than any of their competitors – however attractive it might be to believe that General Gordon’s skull-shaped hill was the original site of the crucifixion.

Golgotha is a huge slab of marble with slots in the top that traditionally supported Roman crosses. Visitors and pilgrims can climb to the top and put their hands into the slot that is believed to have been the site of Jesus’ own cross.

As you would expect, opinions on the historical weight of the tradition vary enormously. However, there is a less well-known tradition about the slab of marble itself that forms the hill. There is a huge crack – a fissure – running down the centre of the slab. The tradition holds that the site of Golgotha had been a marble quarry outside Jerusalem some time before Jesus. All of the marble had been quarried away for building, except for the huge block that makes up Golgotha. This had been rejected by the builders because of the crack running right through it; it stood alone, a piece of marble rejected by the builders, to become the place where Jesus was crucified – the “cornerstone” of God’s salvation for the world.

## **Going deeper into the text (Mark 11:27-12:12)**

Both Isaiah's and Jesus' parables of the vineyard protest the politics of land distribution in their time. Today millions of people around the world continue to be displaced by the growing consolidation of land ownership in the hands of the rich and of corporate interests.

Land is the basic reality of all nations, defining boundaries, causing wars, producing wealth. Mark's parable about the tenant farmers repeats itself in our day. The history of Britain and many European countries is one of colonialism: To protect and expand its territory, these countries have engaged in aggressive activities. In pursuit of that policy, the indigenous peoples who had lived for centuries on the land was exploited and displaced. Too often religion in these countries has blessed this fixation on its territory.

The story of people on the land has unfolded with restless movement and struggle. Land was taken from the native peoples and given to European immigrants. Many of the latter carved out small farms. Today those farms are passing out of existence, having been bought up by agribusiness companies. The children of slaves left

poverty in the country sides for the promise of wealth in the cities; today many of their children's children are crowded into unliveable spaces in inner cities. Merchants and professionals migrated to the cities, and then abandoned them in the "flight" of the middle class to the surrounding suburbs. Today some suburban residents are returning to the cities and displacing lower-income residents by "gentrifying" old neighbourhoods.

What migrations did your ancestors experience before and during this century? Did any of your family move from rural to urban centres? What migrations have you experienced in your lifetime? Think about the causes behind these moves.

## All age worship ideas (Mark 12: 1-12)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

**Reflection:** Israel should have been the example to every other nation of the significance of living in relationship with God. Yet even in her religious practices she dishonoured God. The prophets who were sent through history to call Israel to repent, to come home to God, were each in turn rejected. Now, in the parable, the landowner (God) sends his son and the son is taken and killed. Greed and corruption seem to win out but that is not the way of the kingdom. Israel who was to build the new kingdom is replaced by a new way. Jesus will be the stone that holds this new way together and it will be good news for the rejected and neglected but bad news for those who practice injustice at their expense.

**Ideas:** This might be a good opportunity to focus and pray for Israel/Palestine. It can

also be a good way of helping all generations to think of how making decisions that do not take God's kingdom agenda into account can very quickly become bad decisions with serious consequences.

**Game:** Get hold of a giant Jenga game and get people to think of bad decisions and consequences as you play. This could be a global, national or personal example. Play until the tower collapses then leave it.

**Think of:**

- The way in which the lines were drawn when Israel was created after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War was not done in the best way and led to many of the problems faced today.
- The wall that separates the Palestinians has not protected the nation but fostered resentment and hatred.
- President Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem is another prime example of people in authority making bad decisions.
- History and the present, show that we do not always learn from our mistakes.

**Prayer:** Use a large map of Israel/Palestine to help focus people's prayers. Invite people to come and rebuild the Jenga tower and as they do to offer one sentence as their prayer for the damaged relationships and the many injustices that currently take place.

It may be that people do not want to speak but they wish to place a brick as a sign of their commitment to pray for peace.

If you wish to explore issues of peace and justice further you may still be able to get hold of *Peacebuilders: Children of Peace* – an excellent resource created by the URC and Methodist Church in partnership with Church of North India and Henry Martyn

Institute to be used by Pilots and children's groups in both denominations. Darren has a copy available if needed.

## Liturgies and hymns Mark 2: 1-12

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.



apud: phillip medhurst

THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN, MATTHEW 21:33-39. JAN LUYKEN

excudit: harry kossuth

### Prayer of Confession

Loving and merciful One,

We thank you for the community in which you have placed us,

For the brothers and sisters with whom we walk this pilgrim journey.

Yet, we confess that we fail to love as you love.

We are quick to share our own stories

While we ignore the stories of others.



**We fail to see your Kingdom in parables  
Because we fail to see your Kingdom in each other.  
We push aside those whom we believe are the least in your Kingdom.  
Form in us a new vision of community in which there is  
Neither East nor West,  
Neither South nor North.  
Challenge our assumptions,  
And instil in us a holy disease  
Until all have heard your story.  
For the sake of your Kingdom that is and is not yet. Amen.**

### **Assurance of Pardon: Colossians**

The Father has rescued us from the power of darkness  
And transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,  
In whom we have redemption,  
The forgiveness of sins.  
Silence and Meditation  
Our forbears' belief that the slow digestive process of cows was well-suited  
To describe the process of engaging with Scripture stands in  
Marked contrast to the language and expectations of a fast-food generation.  
Their wisdom calls us to a more gentle rhythm of prayerful  
Reading in which patience, silence and receptivity are vital ingredients.  
In a world of sound-bites we need to learn again the art of listening  
With the ear of the heart.

*Robert Atwell*

### **A Prayer for Illumination**

**God of light and not of darkness,  
We thank you that in times past you spoke to your people  
And led them through a wilderness.  
Today, we find ourselves in our own peculiar wilderness.**

**Shed light on our path and lead us by your Spirit,  
For without your guidance  
We will surely lose our way.  
Bless now the reading and hearing of the gospel.  
As your servant speaks,  
Give words to utter,  
Ears to hear,  
And hearts to respond.  
Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.**

We pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Holy, subversive one, you always find ways of helping us see the truth.

**Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.**

We pray for all creation, especially seed, soil, fruit, and harvest. We pray for those who work

The land, and those who study better ways to steward it. Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.

We pray for those who do the work of accounting for resources that they may be faithful in

Both counting and distribution.

**Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those experiencing loss or illness, (especially), that they may be healed in body,

Mind, and spirit.

**Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.**

We pray for your church, and your people, so that we might better know and understand the

Sacred stories that are our inheritance.

**Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.**