

Jesus on ideology and piety (Mark 12: 18-34)

The Question about the Resurrection

18 Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, ¹⁹‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁰There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; ²¹and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; ²²none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. ²³In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.’

24 Jesus said to them, ‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? ²⁷He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.’

The First Commandment

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ ²⁹Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love 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, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ ³²Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; ³³and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Jesus is now faced by his opponents with a series of questions which present as theological, yet for him plug directly into the political and economic system represented by the Jerusalem religious elite. His exorcism of the temple (11:15-19) immediately provoked the outraged question from the ruling Sanhedrin: “What is your source of authority for doing these things? Who gave you the right to do what you’re doing?” (11:27-28).

Jesus refuses to answer their question; instead, Mark goes on to present a series of confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders that expose the various

aspects of the corruption that has so enraged Jesus. The leaders are the wicked tenants of his parable (12: 1-12). Their Poll Tax trap backfires spectacularly, as Jesus exposes the way in which they are in hock to Rome and effectively acknowledge Caesar as Lord, rather than Yahweh.

Now he is apparently asked to adjudicate in the theological dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees over the resurrection. Once again, Jesus will use the dispute to uncover the way in which the Sadducees are using theology and piety for their own political and economic benefit.

Jesus and the Sadducees (12: 18-27)

This is not a trivial doctrinal dispute about the afterlife (eschatology), but about the ways in which the Sadducees use theological arguments to ensure that their considerable wealth is kept within the family.

Let's be clear: Jesus is firmly on the side of resurrection. But for him, resurrection gives weight and seriousness to human decisions and actions in this world. He believes firmly in an afterlife – but one lived here, in a renewed world, not in heaven. His eschatology is that God is transforming this world into the Kingdom of God. This is an act of re-creation: the world as we have made it is terminally corrupt and has to die, and the new world of the Kingdom is to be born in its place.

The promise of the Kingdom is for everyone – particularly for those whose experience of life is a living hell. Resurrection is the guarantee of that promise: we will be raised to share in the new life of the Kingdom.

Jesus is clear that when the world is transformed into the Kingdom of God, the “great reversal” will entail a radical redistribution of wealth from the “haves” to the “have-nots”. That is why he told the rich man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor.

The course of the debate exposes the ways in which the Sadducees (a wealthy, conservative elite) are justifying hanging on to their wealth, rather than using it to attend to the needs of the poor and dispossessed. In this encounter, they use a theological argument with two strands: they deny the resurrection (meaning that no account of their actions will be demanded of them), and appeal to the tradition of Levirate marriage (the marriage of a widow to her husband's brother(s) to make the whole notion of an afterlife appear ridiculous.

Levirate marriage was supposed to ensure that vulnerable women were cared for economically, not to ensure the transfer of wealth from one generation of males to the next. We have already seen Jesus mount a damning indictment against the violence inherent in a patriarchal society (10: 1-16); here he exposes the ways in which the Sadducees view women as “baby-making factories” whose function is to provide the next generation of male heirs to inherit the family wealth.

If there is resurrection, what we do in the present has significance for life in the

Kingdom. For Jesus, that means crucially that we cannot be innocent or naïve about the wealth and power that gives advantage over those with less, or the ways in which it condemns the most vulnerable to a hellish existence without the means to sustain life. This is not a sign of God's blessing, but of greed, corruption and theft ... and the God who is the source of Jesus' authority will hold us to account.

The Greatest Commandment (12: 18-34)

It is with this in mind that we need to read the next encounter – this time, with one of the group to whom Jesus is closest to theologically, but who are some of his fiercest and most deadly opponents.

It is significant that Mark does not treat the scribes and Pharisees as a homogenous group. In this encounter, we ought to recognize the scribe's sincerity: he has just witnessed the dispute with the Sadducees, and is genuinely impressed that Jesus has "answered them well". There is none of the false flattery of calling Jesus, "Teacher" (see 12:14); instead, Mark frames the account to show that the scribe sees Jesus as an equal, and ask the question about the greatest commandment as a "theological ally".

We ought not to doubt the sincere enthusiasm of his response, either: there is a bubbling joy of finding himself on the same theological page of deeply shared passions and convictions. His answer is "wise" in Jesus' estimation (12:34). And yet Jesus' own reply to this enthusiasm, passion and wisdom suggests that Jesus does not see them as on the same page in quite the same way: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (12:34). Why might this be?

Both share the conviction that it is the dual commandment to love God and neighbor that constitute the greatest commandments. Love of God alone is not enough; loving God properly belongs with love of neighbor, because the two are somehow inextricably connected. How this connection works is what is causing Jesus' reservations.

In Jesus' various encounters with the scribes and Pharisees, we see that the Purity Code often pits love of God against love of neighbour. This is particularly visible, for example, in the disputes about Sabbath observance, which apparently make it unlawful for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath (see 3: 1-6). For Jesus, this dichotomy is entirely false, because it assumes that God is effectively more driven by divine ego rather than compassion for human suffering and need of salvation. For Jesus, the commandment to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength is fulfilled in loving one's neighbour as one's self. This love for neighbour is compassion-driven, mirroring God's own heart and priorities. Compassion-driven love for neighbour means that we cannot see something happening to our neighbour that we would not want for ourselves and our loved ones and fail to act. That action is the means by which God answers our neighbour's prayers for help and deliverance. It constitutes "true obedience" to the command to love God.

Just as the rich man "still lacked one thing" (holding on to his possessions), the scribe

also “lacks one thing”, for all that he shares Jesus’ theological priorities. If the scribe really understood the commandments in the same way as Jesus, he could not remain part of the temple system. He would recognize that he was part of a system from which the poorest and most vulnerable needed saving.

The term “orthodoxy” means “right belief”. We have seen in the encounter with the Sadducees and the scribe that what we believe about God matters. We have seen, too, that what we “believe” about our neighbour matters equally! It is not enough to be “theologically sound” – to “say the right things”. The actual content of what we believe is demonstrated by the way it leads us to behave and act. The most visible test case is how we view and treat our neighbour – the “other”. “True faith” in Jesus is not “saying the right things” about Jesus theologically; it is about relating to God and to our neighbours as Jesus did (the term for this is “Orthopraxy - “right action”). It is “true” to the extent that it unites orthodoxy and orthopraxy: that we behave and act in ways that are recognisably like Jesus, and make a Jesus-shaped difference to the lives of those in our communities and world.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 12: 18-34)

Jesus engages the authorities in arguments over scripture because the latter routinely used the Bible to support their position in society. To combat this Jesus uses “scripture against scripture,” and so must we today.

Consider the woman who is the subject of the debate in Mark 12:18ff. Wherein lies her worth as a human being in the eyes of these Sadducees? She is property, valued only as a source of children for the original husband. What has it meant for half of humankind to be valued as the property of the other half, and for women's worth to be found only in child-bearing?

Let us reflect upon a disturbing question: What do we do with “texts of terror” (those parts of Scripture that appear to support the abuse of one group of people by another)? For example, the Bible has been used throughout church history to denigrate and subjugate women.

Consider the following: Let a woman learn silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” (1 Timothy 2: 11-15)

That such texts have been interpreted in an oppressive, patriarchal tradition in the church is evident from the following citations from famous theologians:

"It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a helper to man not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation..."

Mark's Jesus guides us in a different direction! He too sees the use of scripture to oppress. His response: he does not ignore the oppressive text cited by the Sadducees, or reject the text, or walk away from scripture. Rather, he refutes the use of scripture to justify oppressive social structures—in this case the objectification of women—by using scripture itself, and he returns scripture to the service of liberation. In other words, Mark's Jesus employs scripture to subvert the oppressive use of scripture!

Scripture—as the story of God's liberating love and the call to live according to it—compels us to face and reinterpret the abusive texts. Jesus sets the precedent for this approach! But how do we approach the Bible in this way? This question deserves to be explored deeply over a lifetime.

We suggest a starting point: Face head-on the difficult texts. Do so by appealing not to specific texts in isolation but rather to the Bible as a whole, considering its overall truth claims. Texts that seem to subjugate must be tested against the central biblical demands for love and justice. Texts, which contradict those central claims, are not normative for contemporary Christian life.

Then explore the factors that may have caused the text to be written as it was. Keep in mind the huge cultural gulf between ourselves and these ancient texts; many troubling texts are less problematic when understood in their own socio-historical context. Or perhaps a New Testament text is based upon the writer's untenable interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, such as in the passage from Timothy quoted above. Michael Lerner in *Jewish Renewal* offers an interesting rationale for texts of terror. He suggests that the Hebrew Bible contain two voices: the voice of God and the voice of the writers' pain and brokenness masquerading as the voice of God. That pain—accumulated over generations of slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert—distorted, to varying degrees, the writers' ability to know and reflect God (just as our pain and brokenness do the same).

How might we discern between these two voices? Lerner suggests that the voice of God can be found in those parts of scripture that nurture about possibility we can join God in the task of healing the world from its domination by pain, oppression

All age worship ideas (Mark 12: 18-34)

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 - Following on from his altercation over resurrection with the Sadducees Jesus now has the 'full set' of traps laid by different factions of religious leadership. He has managed to come through all of them unscathed. Then comes another teacher of the law who does not set a trap but presents Jesus with an opportunity to say what he is about. His responses to the previous attempts to trap him have wrong-footed his opponents and left them questioning their own beliefs at times but what of the law? What does Jesus see as the primary teaching in all that has been held dear for so many centuries? Love. Love God with everything and as you show love to yourself by providing everything you need do the same for your neighbour.

Ideas – My first thought, technology willing, was to get a video or excerpts of Bishop Michael Curry's address at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. There is a lot in there to draw out the importance of love.

Have a stack of boxes – different shapes and sizes. Keep some blank boxes back but on each of the others write or print a label (heart-shaped?) highlighting different aspects of life:

Home, Church, Work, School, College, In the Pub, On Holiday, Out With Friends, Shopping, Resting, Gaming, Playing Sports, Running/Working Out, Filling in a Tax Return, Saving Up/Banking.

Invite people to pile the boxes which they think connect with 'Love God' ...of course everything should be included in the pile which makes us think on how we honour God with everything, whatever we are doing. The teacher of the law makes an important point when he says that the way in which we love is worth far more than our religious activities and piety.

On the blank boxes, or on the others in the pile, invite people to write labels describing how they could love their neighbour. Perhaps draw out in conversation who we see as our neighbours today.

Prayer - When your pile is complete you could use this as a focus for prayer – inviting God to identify for us the areas where we do not love him and the neighbours we have shied away or avoided showing love to.

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 12: 18-34)

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

Leader; Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.”

All. Open our ears to hear your words.

Leader Jesus said, “He has sent me to proclaim release
To the captives and recovery of sight to the blind”

All .open our mouths to sing your praise.

Leader Jesus said, “He has sent me to let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”.

All .Open our hearts to embrace your love.

(if needed this call to worship could be interactive with children holding up pictures of ears, mouths and hearts or maybe even doing appropriate actions.)

Praise a Kingdom acclamation

Leader Let us share the words which Jesus teaches us:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,

For they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,

For they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

Righteousness,

for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,

For they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,

For they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,

For they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for

Righteousness’ sake,

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ...

Blessed are those who are reviled and persecuted

And falsely accused on my account.

Rejoice and be glad,

(this lends itself to multiple voices very easily)

Jesus’ Kingdom parables

Voice 1

**The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. A
Man found it, and he concealed it. Then in his joy he goes and
Sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13.44).**

Voice 2

**“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine
Pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and**

Sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13.45-46).

Voice 3

“Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of Heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his Treasure both what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13.52).

Voice 4

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took And hid in three measures of flour, till it was all Leavened.” (Matthew 13.33).

Voice 5

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a Man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, But it grows larger than all the garden plants and becomes a Tree. The birds of the air can come and make nests in its Branches.” (Matthew 13.31-32).

Voice 6

The kingdom of God is like a man scattering seed on the Ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed Sprouts and grows —he knows not how. The earth, by itself, Produces first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in The ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once the man puts in The sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4.26-29).

Voice 7

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that fisher-folk threw Into the sea. The net gathered all sorts of fish. When the net Was full, the fisher-folk drew it ashore. They sat down and Sorted the good fish into containers but threw away the Bad.” (Matthew 13.47-48).

Silence for reflection

Leader Jesus said, “One does not live by bread alone.”

All open our ears to hear your words.

Leader Jesus said, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

All open our mouths to sing your praise.

Leader Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

All open our hearts to embrace your love.

(Again this very wordy meditation can be visual up by bringing forward that represent each parable, pearls flour etc.)

Dismissal Romans

The kingdom of God is not food and drink,

**But righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Go in peace to Love and serve the Lord.
All In the name of Christ. Amen**

(John Davis)