

Mark 12.28-34
10th November 2024
Remembrance Sunday

You're not far wrong

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

A much-used story in ethics classes runs like this, and it illustrates the kind of choices we all have to make from time to time.

Two explorers find themselves deep in the jungle and come upon a tiger. One silently pulls on the shirt of the other, he's found a bush big enough for them both to hide behind. Together they can sit it out and let the man-eating tiger pass by.

However, the other explorer is already taking off his stout walking boots so he can run away faster. His friend is mystified and says *but you'll never run faster than that tiger*. To which his now bare footed friend agrees and responds. *That's right, I don't have to, I just need to run faster than you. Because if the tiger eats you first, it won't then bother coming after me*. Some friend!

The story highlights two pathways in decision making. The first friend thought collectively, the second individually.

The first friend was concerned about his colleague and his solution was to find a place behind the bush where they might have been safe together.

The second friend is an example of Darwin's theory of The Survival of the Fittest. In outrunning his friend, he saves his own life as the tiger brings down his colleague. He sacrifices the safety of the other, to save himself.

Now, I think today's story from Mark's gospel about an encounter between Jesus and a scribe helps us think through which explorer made a more Christlike decision in their moment of crisis? That's because in answering the scribe Jesus says, in effect, that loving our neighbour and looking out for one another is a way, in fact, of loving God.

Jesus' questioner that day was a scribe, and they were important in the time of Jesus. In fact, it is thought that this group had actually grown in importance between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, and that every village in ancient Israel would have had at least one resident scribe.

They were rather like the Pharisees. But unlike them most scribes were not landowners or traders. Yet both groups were represented on The Sanhedrin, the country's highest court.

Scribes multi-tasked. So, on one day they might be attending to peoples' legal needs in the village, drawing up Bills of Divorce or a mortgage certificate. On another they would be copy writing part of the Torah ready for its new home in a local synagogue. And, on another occasion, in the absence of a priest, a scribe would also serve as a religious teacher. So, they not only wrote out the scriptures, they also taught them. Which essentially meant that they

used their extensive knowledge of all the commandments of the Jewish Scriptures to interpret them and apply them to the lives of ordinary people. Quite a power in all that, as folk asked not only what do the Scriptures say, but how should they be applied to my day-to-day life.

Perhaps that's why Jesus seems a little shocked by the scribe in today's reading. This man, who was so used to having others ask him questions, now stands before Jesus, and asks him, as if Jesus were a scribe, what he thinks are the greatest commandments.

And today's story is unexpected, especially its ending when Jesus commends the scribe. It was usually the case that there was a mutual antipathy between Jesus and the scribes. They thought Jesus was a blasphemer and insurrectionist, and for his part Jesus calls them 'snakes' and tells his hearers to beware of them.

So, on that day as he taught in a public place in Jerusalem, a scribe in the audience had already broken ranks somewhat with his colleagues, and instead of dismissing Jesus as a crackpot, or feeling threatened by him because Jesus so often appears to think outside of the box – a box the scribes worked so hard to ring fence, this particular open minded scribe found himself so impressed by the way Jesus answered questions that he decided to ask one himself. It is there in verse 28 *Which is the first of all the commandments?*

Now, he was not just referring to the Ten Commandments which we often see painted on the wall behind the altar in an English village parish church. In this scribe's world there were not 10 but 613 commandments. They were called *mitzvahs*. So, when a Jewish boy came of age the ceremony was called a *Bar Mitzvah*. The day he became a *son of the commandments*.

Well, Jesus selects two and blends them together into poll position. He said to the scribe; *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and then love your neighbour as yourself.*

Jesus believes in the collective, in a spirit of generous community and of not living life just in an ego centred way. I suspect if he was telling today's opening story his sympathies would have been with the first explorer who looked out for both himself and his colleague.

Yet, all too often it's the second explorer, the one who was only interested in looking after himself, that seems to win the day. And maybe, even if we'd love to think we're more like the kind and caring explorer, we do recognise aspects of self-centred explorer number two in our own way of thinking and living.

In *The Book of Joy*, which chronicled an fascinating extended few days of meetings and discussions between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, there's a record of a discussion they had on this subject and why we sometimes act in such an egotistical manner. In fact, over a three- or four-day period this is the first subject on which they did not quite see eye to eye.

Their focus was on why Hitler became so obsessed with power. The Dalai Lama started by saying he was perplexed because he'd read that, as a boy, Hitler, even though he had something of a harsh father, was much loved by his mother Klara.

Tutu took a tougher line and said he believed all bullies have one characteristic in common and that is a sense of insecurity and inadequacy that comes from their early years at home, and for which they are constantly trying to compensate in their latter life.

I think the Dalai Lama was won over by his friend's argument because he ends the conversation by saying: *we can all become self-centred, always think I, I, I. A self-centred attitude brings a sense of insecurity and fear, then frustration, anger and violence.* Pertinent words, especially for Remembrance Sunday.

Now, the point is, I think, that in these two commandments, which Jesus blends into one, Jesus, the radical Jesus, challenges us to step outside the Survival of the Fittest paradigm, and to live generously and at times, even sacrificially, for the benefit of others.

The scribe was beginning to see that. He knew there were numerous commandments, for he had, all his working life, advocated that people kept as many as possible. Yet such conscientious obedience, such rigid observance, could be both wonderful and disastrous. Wonderful in its attempt to please God, disastrous if the very act of keeping so many regulations so rigidly ironically obscured actually loving and honouring other people.

Take the times Jesus was criticised for disobeying Sabbath laws. His accusers would have preferred his disciples to have stayed hungry or members of the crowd to remain unhealed rather than Jesus breaking a technicality.

The scribe got it, and even says: *to love your neighbour as yourself means far more than any whole offerings or sacrifices.* Somewhat echoing Hosea's words about God: *I require mercy and not sacrifice.*

William Loader, the antipodean theologian says, *there is a hierarchy of values here.* In other words, some ideas override other ideas.

The law of Sabbath's prime reason was to bring about a creative rhythm to a week, offering restorative rest. Feeding the hungry and healing the sick are higher up any hierarchy of values than Sabbath keeping. So, in that situation, looking out for the needs of the other person and responding with compassion trumps a tight legalistic approach to how one day is treated differently.

Of course, none of this is easy. It's about using our mind in working out what are the bible's core principles. And the bible isn't always an easy book to read.

Sam Wells, the current vicar of St Martin in the Fields says that when it comes to faith and ethics the choices are rarely binary but *yes, no, or maybe.* The maybe

option depends on things like context as it seeks to find the most loving way forward in a particular situation.

It's appropriate, I think, to remember that St Martin's Day is November 11th, as it happens, Armistice Day. On that day the Church remembers St Martin of Tours who was a soldier who ended up denouncing the horror of war. In his early adult years, coming from a rich family, he was celebrated as a brave and heroic military man. He's known for cutting his Roman Soldier's red cloak in two so that he could give half to a beggar as an act of compassion. And then, later in life, because of his faith he gave up the army. Accused of cowardice he answered his accusers by saying he would walk onto the battlefield to help the wounded rather than to fight. A promise he never had to keep for the next day peace was declared.

The point is that when faith is living and vibrant in a person's life, it has to constantly make choices. It's a discernment process and it's almost never enough just to try to live by a dry and inflexible set of rules, because every situation and context is different. It makes life messy and sometimes it makes faith confusing. But it's a task we should never give up on, trying to make sense of the words of Jesus, that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God and then to love others as we love ourselves.

When the scribe heard Jesus say these words his mind went into overdrive, and perhaps against all his natural inclinations he processed these words and ended up, probably surprising himself saying, *that means loving others is much more important than making sacrifices.*

Jesus seems to smile, and looks at him and says, *You're not far wrong.*

May we sense our Lord saying that to us from time as we too, even in the complexities of life, seek to discern what it means for us, in our context, to keep the greatest commandment. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 8th November 2024