

Worship. Westfield Drive. 22nd March 2020. Bob Ridley.

READING Mark 12: 13-17 Who's authority

REFLECTION Now it's the scribes turn

Jesus seems to have arrived in Jerusalem and spent much of his time teaching and conversing with the religious leaders of his day. Some of this was antagonistic though at other times it seems to have been more a matter of discussing the meaning and implications of scripture and the ways in which it had been interpreted.

We have already heard of him clashing with the Pharisees, an elite and fairly influential group who accepted the Torah, and the many laws which had been added to it, and practiced a form of ritualised and strict adherence to the laws. They believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time when God would restore Israel. They were the ones we heard asking about paying taxes to Caesar. In the time Mark was actually writing after the destruction of the temple they had become far more influential since the priests had nowhere to practice and the faith was continued largely by teaching and personal religious practice.

In some ways in Mark's time the Jewish people faced a similar dilemma to the one we face today when the social and political situation has made it necessary for us to work out how to continue without being able to gather in a formal place of worship. And they didn't have internet access, streaming, audio and visual recording, or Skype.

They seem to have been in some ways to have become aligned with the Herodians who joined in that questioning. The Herod family by some devious means had secured the blessing of Rome to act as Jewish kings and the Herodians were secular

supporters of the Herodian monarchs. They tended to cater to Rome, the occupiers of their land, and accordingly the common people hated them while many of the elite accommodated to the restrictions and requirements of the Roman overlords.

Then there were the Sadducees, an influential and elite group mostly of merchants and middle class. They accepted the Torah only and not the many other requirements of the Pharisees., and rejected the idea of the resurrection of the dead. They were probably a more educated and liberal group and perhaps saw people like Jesus as bad for business. They were the ones who came with the question as to what would happen if a woman married seven husbands who all died leaving her childless and then died herself. They asked whose wife she would be. Perhaps this was a way of bolstering their opposition to the idea of resurrection.

Now it is the turn of the scribes. These were largely a professional group and highly educated and charged with copying the scrolls under very strict conditions, but were also the lawyers and sometimes even bankers in the temple administration.

One of them heard the questioning back and forth and seemingly intervened just to discuss with Jesus his view on the hierarchical importance of the commandments. It was the kind of question and answer that might go on among professors in their common room today. Interestingly Jesus turns this into a question to the scribe, much as he had done with the man who asked how to inherit eternal life, and when they give a similar answer Jesus remarks that he is not far from the Kingdom of God. Some see that as Jesus commending him but perhaps it is a challenge and a warning for after that the questioning ceased.

Jesus continues with a riddle about the nature of the Lord of the Davidic line and alludes to the Messianic hope, but then turns to a more practical illustration once again.

The scribes had puzzled over the priorities in faith and love and devotion and Jesus points to the poor widow who gave more than she could afford, yet a very small amount, while others proudly put in large sums. It was not the amount of money that made the difference, but the fact that they gave out of their abundance while she gave out of her poverty. They could afford it and she could not. They flaunted their gift. She quietly gave her little.

Again and again in the parables and stories of Jesus the common wisdom is set on its head and the unlikely ones are the heroes. The hated Samaritan, as opposed to the respected temple leaders; the Roman governor who finds no fault while the people of faith condemn, the insignificant children versus the important adults, even tax collector instead of the pharisee, the women more than the men, the young prostitute instead of the rich host, the woman caught in adultery forgiven while her accusers are challenged and condemn themselves.

Again and again it is not personal power or possessions or riches but the riches of the kingdom. Humility, compassion and grace that are highlighted.

We are facing a time of total uncertainty and we see the extremes of human behaviour. Those who fight for themselves and those who take the unusual times to talk more to those they meet and to enquire after their health. Adult children concerned for the health of their parents, doctors and nurses working the knowledge that they are exposing themselves to risk, people taking the time to make an extra phone call and the

many who have been praying and thinking about how we can offer support to our members and to others in the community.

Last week I met a young woman in a queue at the supermarket who seemed too young to part of the seniors special time and in fact she was a young single mother, worrying about her kids and worried about trying to get toilet paper since she also suffered Crohn's disease. She was distressed by previous experiences of empty shelves and people scrambling to get more by having different members of the family all take a pack of toilet paper or packs of pasta. She was worried about the coming closure of the school and how she would continue her work and still care for her children. It was a fairly fleeting meeting but in the midst of her despair I was able to share the story of someone who bought toilet paper and left it at the counter for those who might have a greater need. I was also able to make sure she got some this time and exchange good wishes with her, and perhaps enjoy the smile on her face as she shopped successfully for a change.

The supermarkets are doing the work of Christ in ensuring some care for the sick and elderly and trying to curb the excesses and greed of others. We have prayed for the politicians to act morally and responsibly and in this crisis, it seems our prayers are being answered. In fact, many people are beginning to curb their excesses and encourage others. The grumbling about those who don't, sometimes with racial overtones, is perhaps beginning to be balanced as people search for better news and as business people work out how to lessen the impact on their employees. The new sessions with their war-time like overtones also regularly include suggestions for safety and the encouragement to leave enough for others.

Researchers work to find a cure, teachers and psychologists advise how to hold children in love in the midst of this, and many I think are beginning to see life as more than personal gain and aggrandisement. Certainly we are seeing that this virus can rain equally on the just and the unjust, and none of us is immune from the virus or from fear or perhaps even from a little personal greed as we want to make sure we will have enough – and perhaps a bit to spare. My son-in-law visited Melbourne but would not risk staying with us this time in case he endangered us but he did offer to make deliveries to us if we were in need. He is not a religious type of individual but he thinks deeply and has a strong moral sense. Perhaps that is not too far from the vision of Revelations where no one will say to another here is the Lord for all will know him directly.

We may be learning to have faith without the trappings of the particular religion and may be learning to live in the upside-down world Jesus described, where the unlikely ones are the heroes.

Somehow the words attributed to St. Francis though in fact not his ring true.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

O Divine Master, let me not seek as much

to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

And perhaps Bonhoeffer's prediction and proposal, in the 1930's, that we must come to our faith for sustenance but then live in the world with no extra power or privilege as if God was dead, is in fact becoming our reality.

Amen

At this point we normally have the opportunity for questions and comment but as we are not physically gathered together I invite you to talk to any who may be watching or listening with you, or if you are alone to write something on paper as your own reflection. You may even want to phone or email someone to let them know what you have been thinking and to share their thoughts as well.

The Lord be with you, Amen