

The Questions Continue:
Matthew 22:34-46

Oct 2020

Deuteronomy 34.1-12

Moses Dies and Is Buried in the Land of Moab

34 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Matthew 22:34-46

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,

35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

38 This is the greatest and first commandment.

39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:

42 "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."

43 He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'?

45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Introduction

We had two readings today that speak right into where we seem to be by the end of October 2020

We have moved from Exodus to Deuteronomy but once again we are at the point of crossing into the promised land. It's Mt Nebo, It's the plains of Moab, it's the end of Moses' tenure as Prophetic Leader and the rise of Joshua. And again I remember I stood there last year in modern day Jordan taking in what I could of what Moses and the people saw as they transitioned from desert wanderer to people in the land of promise – all very concrete.

It occurred to me that while I am in no way a Moses, I have led for a small generation and Trinity Church is preparing for a season of transition. We all face the Jordan now.

Then we heard Jesus again in the sharp combative Gospel of Matthew as it moves to the cross. Once again he is in the bull ring in Jerusalem with those who would skewer him on a question. This was the last session of challenge by question until he faced Pilate on the eve of his death.

Right up until his final saving work the question remains, Who is Jesus? and what do we need to hear from him?

Once again I see a clear link with the season Trinity Church is about to enter: In a structured way, someone like an Archdeacon is going ask anyone who will answer over a number of session: “Who is Trinity Church?” “What makes you to be you?” “Why do you do things the way you do?”

I would like to look at today's Gospel with that in mind

Last week Divya did a great job of showing how profoundly Jesus answered the question of the coin and paying tribute or taxes. The Q & A game now continues

Questions and Core Issues:

In today's gospel passage Jesus is asked a question which he answers and then he himself asks a question which no one can answer.

Jesus was a Jew and the business of asking and facing questions had a clear place in life. Perhaps because he had such a clear insight into people's hearts he rarely answered a question as if it were neutral and innocent.

- His main response to a question was to offer another question avoiding any trap laid for him and exposing the hypocrisy of those questioning him, answering a question with a question to reveal the hidden motives.
 - In post-modern terms he not only interrogated the question but exposed the questioner.
- Sometimes he responded by asking people what they themselves thought about something and simply challenged them to practice what they believed.
- On other occasions he referred people to the clear meaning of scripture as if to say: "Why ask me?"
- And on one occasion he did not answer the question and simply maintained silence.

He was particularly careful and circumspect about revealing his identity and what he was really all about. Scholars have described this as the 'messianic secret' and yet who he was formed the lynch pin of all he did and was going to do.

In the previous chapter, 21:23 Jesus is asked by what authority he cleaned out the temple and did what he did there: Jesus replied with a question about John the Baptist they were not prepared to answer so he declines to answer their question to him.

Then in Chapter 22 -as we heard last week- the more pointed and loaded questions come as the authorities try to squeeze this disturber of the peace. The shrewd old men send in the 'young lions' to face Jesus. In 22:15 the party of the Pharisees send in their apprentices, their young disciples, to soften up Jesus. The chosen subject was a question of civil tax law but with political implications and religious sensitivities. Imagine these bright eager faces asking Jesus whether they should pay taxes to Caesar? You know the story. Round two to Jesus and this time some blood on the Pharisees and Herodians.

The ring was now open for someone else to ask a question of Jesus and possibly score. Who wants to have a go? So on that same day from the right wing come the privileged and somewhat world wise Sadducees. They were familiar with power and had enough education and worldly wisdom to spin most issues that came their way and look down their noses at the fervent faith of Pharisees and common people. Their subject of choice was a theological question concerning the resurrection and a woman who married 7 brothers.

Jesus gave them a clear answer from the very books of the scripture that that Sadducees most concerned themselves with to show that their question was wrong in its assumptions. Why? because they neither knew the power of God nor the scriptures! *Imagine being told that as a professional man of God? We now have some bruised Sadducees too.*

Matthew tells us that by this stage the crowds were astonished.

Today's Passage:

So even with the score now at 3 nil to Jesus against all comers, the Pharisees still have some fight left in them and they regroup. They come up with a question and this time instead of sending in the young guns, they send in a champion, someone described in Greek as, *nomikos*, a legal expert in the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Here comes a big gun with a big question. *Does Jesus look worried?*

The question he comes with is the sort of question that would be asked of an advanced scholar or discussed between professors. By Jesus' time the Law of Moses had been codified and interpreted to the point where it

consisted of 613 rules. 365 of these were positive, [do...] and 248 negative [don't...]. With that much detail it could be hard to see the wood for the trees. What was the heart of all this? What was central and primary. What did it all hinge on? What could someone think of when they faced a situation that the rules to date did not cover?

There was no official right answer but it might cause Jesus to show his theological, legal or political underwear if he floundered trying to answer it.

Whatever the motives of the Pharisees at this point Jesus seems to pick up the question and address it. This was something he was very pleased to speak about. It's the question: "What is it that God most requires from his people?"

Jesus describes the heart of the Law of Moses, the Torah, and the Prophets with two quotations:

The first came from the Hebrew version (Masoretic Text) of the Scriptures, a confession known as the *Shema* [Deuteronomy 6:5 also 11:13-21, Num 15:38-41]

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment.

This is the first requirement of those living as part of God's chosen people in covenant with God. The sort of love is that of *agape*. This is self-giving love, it's the investment and sacrificing of self for the benefit of another. This is not the love between friends, family. The first and greatest command is to pour out ourselves to the One who is worthy.

He is worthy because:

- He has created and sustained us and all we enjoy
 - He has saved us from our lost state and in Jesus Christ made a new covenant with us
 - He has promised us an eternal destiny and relationship that will not end.
- In short He has loved and us calls us to love him with all he has given us.

If I were to boil this down to something we could apply this would be it: Be the best you can be for God. Live your life, you heart, soul and mind life, before God at all times as an offering for his pleasure.

In contrast to the general view of most people today, Don't consider yourself living on an obscure rock circling a medium sized star in an otherwise vast cold universe but understand yourself as being on the stage of God's provision at the centre of God's view.

I am not suggesting a flat earth cosmology but a theological perspective that puts our life on earth as being the opportunity to love God by giving our best at every opportunity. What we do, what we think what we feel, what we decide, each day matters. Loving God means giving our best for His pleasure according to His standards.

This is what Jesus puts forth as being primary in the Law and the Prophets, two thirds of the Old Testament.

He then offers a second quote from Leviticus 19:18: [drawn from the Greek version of the OT scriptures LXX.]

39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Any sincere offering of love to God will overflow into love for those around us. St. John put it very strongly in his first epistle:

Those who say, "I **love God**," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot **love God** whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who **love God** must love their brothers and sisters also. 1 John 4:20-21

Application:

Jesus offered a vertical and horizontal outworking of what the whole Law (and the prophets) requires. Love God, Love people.

For the Jew and the Christian, the two belong together according to Jesus. Good works towards those around us are secondary and need to be consequential to the heart, mind and soul rooted love that is held for God. The priority is important and echoes the same arrangement in the 10 Commandments.

I have often heard people express their own view of what makes for righteousness and goodness. So often what Jesus describes as secondary is made the complete measure in some expression of the Golden Rule. I hear it said: "If you do good to others and avoid doing harm you are a good/righteous person." This is not the teaching of Jesus. Love of people is to follow behind love of God. The 10 commandments are structured that way too. Four primary commands in relation to God and six consequent social ethics.

To finish I want to suggest how living this out might take shape.

Let's consider discussions: People discuss all sort of things all the time. What would discussions look like for people who first and above all love God with all their heart, soul and mind?

For the God lover the question is always,

- What would God desire from me or us here?
- What would please God here?
- What does God's word say about the issue at hand?
- What do we know about the mind and heart of God on this matter?

A discussion between God lovers is an attempt to better discern the heart and mind of God and not promote their own opinions. Naturally any conclusion should also be an expression of love for those affected.

There is a clear of example of this in the Book of Acts when the still exclusively Jewish Church had to decide what to do about the new Gentile believers:

Acts 15:28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us

Their first reference was the mind of the Holy Spirit and then their own sense of agreement. God lovers have a vertical dimension primary to their discussion and decision making and not only a horizontal one.

Conclusion:

Jesus had clearly answered the big question. He then engaged the Pharisees grouped around him and asked them a question:

It's an exegetical question of interpretation from the Psalms which teases out the identity of the Messiah both as a descendent of David and yet having the name of God. This refocuses the real question of, Who is Jesus? The Pharisees are stumped.

With the question time score being four nil to Jesus we read in v. 46b

...from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Q & A was now at an end.

The next person to ask questions would be Pontius Pilate.

Meanwhile in Trinity Church, let the questions begin and answer them well!