

20141026TwentiethAfterPentecost

Reality-Show Jesus: Reflections on Matthew 22:34-46

How are you with reality shows and pop quizzes? I know that I only watch the opening rounds of Pop Idols to hear those who can't sing make fools of themselves. The same with Master Chef – I really like it when at least one makes a complete muck of it; particularly if it is one of the contestants I did like so much.

You do realise that the Gospel passage this morning was basically a pop quiz. This is a passage full of pop quizzes between Jesus and the opponents where Jesus proves to be an unlikely reality show contestant.

Except for last Sunday when we looked at Dedicated Giving, we've been journeying with Jesus in the last week of his life. Jesus had entered the temple to teach on the Monday after entering the city on a donkey, being feted by the crowds as the Messiah – and so from Matthew 21:23, his authority is repeatedly questioned. Notice how he refuses to claim outright his messianic identity. He leaves it to those with ears to hear and eyes to see to make the connection with the Zechariah prophecy of the Messiah arriving in Jerusalem on a donkey, as well as all that had preceded him by his authoritative teachings, exorcisms, and healings.

Now, between his entry into Jerusalem and his increasingly direct denunciations of the religious authorities that culminate in his death, come what scholars refer to as "The Temple Disputes" (Mt 21:23-22:46).

To begin with there is an heightened atmosphere of hostility as we come to the end of Matthew's gospel. We can expect nothing else when we remember that Jesus has turned over tables in the temple, cursed a fig tree, and told three offensive parables. How else could those on the receiving end of his prophetic anger react? When those with prestige and position are challenged, when their treasured beliefs are challenged, they react with hostility and fear. That is as true now as it was then. No sooner has Jesus finished offering three offensive parables (two sons, wicked tenants, and those invited to the wedding banquet) than the Pop Quiz Testing Committees arrive to test Jesus.

A series of people come to Jesus with questions for which there is no right answer and, each time, he manages to speak a word of truth without falling into their trap. First, the Pharisees send some lackeys to trip him up over the tribute question. [That was last week's Gospel reading which we didn't have because of our Pledge Giving Sunday. But we know the story about paying unto Caesar things that are Caesar. He avoided that trap. Next some Sadducees try to trip him up with a tricky question about the resurrection. Again he avoids the trap with theological depth and finesse (*Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ³²'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?' He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' ³³And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching. Matt 22:31-33). Then we come to our passage for this week where the Pharisees come in person with a question about the greatest commandment.*

I'm sure you've all seen TV interviews or heard radio interviews and you wonder if the interviewer is trying to show off their knowledge rather than the interviewee's. But this isn't a Radio or TV interview for Jesus. I think those around him with power and possessions know that he has all the answers, and so they are throwing every obstacle they can think of in the way of his mission and identity. I don't think it's that they don't know with whom they're dealing. I think it's that, at some level, they do, and they are inwardly agitated by the implications. Usually people with this amount of bitterness are trying to trip up people who threaten the hell out of them.

In effect Jesus' opponents try to make him into a reality show contestant in these temple disputes in Matthew. Reality shows, are a phenomenon some have referred to as "a culture of humiliation," testing people all the time. The prize is prestige and money. The penalty is being sent home, one's dreams shattered, with lots of people watching. It is as if the Pharisees are saying Let's see if Jesus can sing in tune like on "Pop Idols" Or lose fat and gain muscle like on "Biggest Loser." Let's see if Jesus can dance for us like on "Strictly come dancing?" Let's see if he can survive in the wilderness like on "Survivor." Let's find out if he can cook like on "Chopped South Africa." Let's make Jesus put on a wet suit and subject him to an obstacle course complete with huge rubber mallets and tubs of green goo and a moat for him to fall into at the slightest misstep like on "Wipeout." These examples are ridiculous and disrespectful to Jesus' mission and identity. But, if we take into account the social context of Matthew's gospel, so are the tests in here. How absurd is this impulse, driven by the desperation of the privileged: "Let's give the saviour a pop quiz and see if he passes."

Well, he passes with Flying Colours! It's no surprise that he does. On the surface, the question "Which is the greatest commandment?" doesn't seem like much of a test. But the question about which of the 613 commandments in the Law was the greatest was hotly debated at the time. Some held that they were equally important; others that a gradation was needed in practical application in daily life.

Jesus' answer juxtaposes two Old Testaments passages from Deuteronomy 6:5, the great Jewish prayer, *the Shema*, with Leviticus 19:18. With this statement, Matthew's Jesus recapitulates his teaching ministry. The mention of the "law and the prophets" takes us back to the Sermon on the mount in Chapter 5 onwards, where Jesus introduces the purpose of his teaching ministry as "**to fulfil** the law and the prophets." It takes us back to 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.'

In giving this answer to the Pharisees' controversial question, "What is the greatest commandment?" this passage is not seeking to prove that these two commandments have never been placed alongside each other before Jesus did it. No, Matthew's Jesus in this passage *is* seeking to prove two things:

- He is underscoring his identity as a God-authorized interpreter of tradition.
- He is countering a notion that that love of God and love of neighbour are two parallel but separate spheres of human responsibility. Rather, they are mutually interdependent loves. To love God is to love the neighbour. To love the neighbour is to love God.

We live in an age when the word 'love' is greatly abused, it is important to remember that **the primary component of biblical love is not affection, but commitment.** That is an interesting viewpoint... rpt. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us. But the command: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*, is not talking about warm feelings but stubborn, unwavering commitment. To love the neighbour (including our enemies) does not mean to feel affection for them, but to imitate God in taking their needs seriously.

But the story doesn't end there. Jesus, having answered the Greatest Commandment question, seizes the initiative and becomes the test giver. He addresses a theological question to the Pharisees with their nationalistic hope of a future Davidic Messiah. He asks whose son the Messiah is supposed to be. They answer "David's." Jesus then asks why David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, addressed the Messiah as Lord when he wrote Psalm 110:1. If David uses such a title of respect and distance for this Messiah, how could the Messiah be simply David's son? And the passage ends on an ominous note. "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."

When dialogue stops, relationship is over. In this story, when dialogue with the teacher ends, plans for his death begin.

For us, these temple disputes can be the beginning rather than the ending: the beginning of a time of testing if we continue journeying with this teacher. Just look at the challenges in Chapter 25 of Matthew: How will we do on his test? Will we keep our light burning (as ten bridesmaids)? Will we invest our talents (as in the parable of the Talents 25:14-30)? Will we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned (25:31-46)? Will we anoint Jesus with devotion and loyalty (as the woman with the alabaster jar) or be satisfied with criticizing others' efforts? In short, will we love our neighbour in loving God and will we love God in loving our neighbour?

You can see it's much harder to take a pop quiz than it is to give one, isn't it?

From a sermon by Alyce M. McKenzie,