

12th March 2017

The Passion of Jesus 2.

Matthew 22

It was budget day on Wednesday. The Chancellor, ‘spreadsheet’ Philip Hammond, was in good form, cracking jokes throughout his speech, usually at Labour’s expense. He announced ... £70m to keep the UK at the forefront of disruptive technology such as biotech, robotics systems and driverless vehicles, a technology, he said ‘I believe the party opposite knows something about’ ... and then said that ‘Under the last Labour government corporation tax was 28% – by the way, they don’t call it the last Labour government for nothing.’

Poor Jeremy Corbyn had to take it all on the chin. The usual parliamentary banter.

For some people the budget was no laughing matter. As ever with political decisions there were winners and losers and much to debate.

The Bible too knows all about winners and losers: **The most successful investor** was Noah. He floated stock, while everything around him went into liquidation.

The most successful female investor was Pharaoh’s

daughter. She went to the Nile bank and floated a prophet.

As we continue our look at the passion narrative in Matthew’s gospel, his account of events in that Holy Week from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, today we have a number of accounts of banter and political questioning where the opponents of Jesus try to throw him trick questions and mock him. The replies of Jesus show his ability to expose the motives of his opponents and their sin but also his passion for God’s kingdom and the transforming love that he offers.

This Lent we are looking at the Passion of Jesus – not just his suffering love for humanity but also what Jesus was passionate about; what he stood for, was enthusiastic about and committed to. In this chapter we see he is passionate about love: love for God and the neighbour. But this love is not a sentimental love but a love that transforms.

The banter and trick questions start in verse 15 when Jesus is put on the spot about paying taxes to Caesar. No National Insurance then, nor manifesto promises. The Romans just did what they wanted to do. Imagine how you’d feel if an invading army marched into your country and demanded you pay them tax as a reward for having

your land stolen! That sort of thing still causes riots and revolutions as it had done while Jesus was growing up in Galilee.

The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus with a trick question. If Jesus had said don't pay taxes he would have been charged with sedition - advocating denial of Roman authority. If he were to answer yes, he risked discrediting himself with the crowd who for both economic and religious reasons resented Roman rule and taxation. Most likely this was the primary purpose of the question: to separate Jesus from the crowd by leading him into an unpopular response.

Jesus response is masterful. He turns the situation back on his opponents. He sets a counter trap when he asks to see a denarius, a roman coin. His interrogators produce one. Jesus looks at it and then asks' 'whose head is this and whose inscription?' The Bible doesn't give an indication of the tone of voice Jesus used when saying this. He could have responded as if being handed a dead rat... urrgh!
‘Whose is this ... image?’

We all know their answer: 'Caesar's'.

Jesus' strategy has led his questioner's to disclose to the crowd that they have a coin with Caesar's image on it. In this moment, they are discredited. Why?

In the Jewish homeland in the first century there were two types of coin. One type, because of the Jewish prohibition of graven images, had no human or animal images. The second type (including Roman coinage) had images. Many Jews would not carry or use coins of the second type.

But Jesus interrogators in the story did. The coin they produced had Caesar's idolatrous image on it as Son of God. Jesus says give it back to him – which is not an endorsement of paying taxes to Rome, otherwise Jesus would have said pay taxes to Caesar.

The second half of Jesus answer is both evocative and provocative. Give to God what belongs to God. For Jesus and many of his Jewish contemporaries everything belongs to God. The land belongs to God, not to local collaborators, not to Rome. What belongs to Caesar? The implication is nothing.

Does Jesus therefore mean that the Kingdom of God is more important than the kingdom of Caesar?

Well it's a clever answer that could and has been read in so many ways. Paul in his letter to the Romans clarifies that civil government has been authorised by God to bring order and care for its citizens, therefore you should pay your taxes as a God given duty, with the rider that you

should do that as long as the civil government carries out God's work.

But at this moment in time Jesus did not want to be identified with the violent revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the Romans by force. The Kingdom of God would defeat the Kingdom of Caesar not by conventional means but by the victory of God's love and power over the greater empire of sin and death itself which is what the next conflict is all about in verses 23-33.

Some Sadducees come and do some nit picking with Jesus. They don't believe in the resurrection. They are the 'let's keep things as they are' party. They enjoyed wealth and influence in Palestinian society and collaborated with the Romans. Resurrection is a revolutionary doctrine and people in power were, and still are, keen to stop it if they could. If you believe that there is life after death you should become fearless in this life. You should have unshakable belief and boundless hope because not even death will be able to stop you!

The Sadducees are trying to stop Jesus by making fun of him and the idea of resurrection. They quote a strange biblical law (Deut 25.5) that if a married man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow and the

children of the new marriage will count as the heirs of the dead man. Same sex marriage is not the only dilemma for biblical scholars! What if this happens seven times question the Sadducees? 'Who is the husband after the resurrection?' they laugh.

The law was probably there to prevent family lines and tribal identity from dying out in Israel. The laws on family and marriage were very pragmatic and designed about human survival. But Jesus has come to bring God's renewal of his people so that there will now be a worldwide family marked by the gospel not tribal identities. The old laws designed to keep the family going will be irrelevant.

When God raises people to new life, which is the Christian hope, they will pass into a new world order in which death has been left behind and a whole new kind of life will result which we can only guess at but need faith and trust in God to bring about. Something which Jesus exposes that the Sadducees lack. They just point to old laws in a game of text bashing. What they don't have is faith and trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the past, present and future who is always making all things new. The great thing about this belief, as both the Pharisees and Sadducees knew, is that people who believe that God is in control, are more ready to work for God in

the present and see God's promises of justice, peace and new life begin to take effect in today's world.

The kingdoms of the world rely on the power of death to keep people in their place. Behave now, be materialistic now, because this life is all there is. Don't risk persecution or suffering for a just cause now because the point of life is just to enjoy life now – because there is nothing else. When you come long and believe in resurrection you can take risks, you can endure suffering because it's not a total disaster, it's not robbing you of your freedom and enjoyment of life, because you believe there is more to come.

That is all because of love. If God is love then love, the relationships we have, will not die and cease. So when the final tricky question comes to Jesus in verses 34-40, 'what is the greatest commandment', he makes love the central motivating factor.

Most of the ten commandments of course start 'do not...' do not steal, commit adultery, murder etc.' Jesus puts the positive emphasis on 'Love': all those commands are based on love. But it starts with loving God. That is the first command. Miss that out and we miss the basis and absolute foundation for love. Love is not something we can subjectively choose but by loving God who loves us

first we acknowledge the reality of the universe –that love is at the heart of all creation.

But did people actually keep these commandments? Did they love God and love their neighbour? In Matthew's gospel in chapter 15, Jesus has already spoken of the need for the heart to be renewed so that people will produce words and deeds which are appropriate rather than making them impure. His challenge in the Sermon on the Mount was that the heart should be renewed, not just the outer actions should confirm with the proper standard.

But how could this be done? Even those of us who have spent our entire lives trying to follow Jesus and live by his grace and love know that the heart doesn't seem to get renewed all in one go. Many, many bits of darkness and impurity still lurk in its depth, and sometimes take a lot of work, prayer and counsel to dig out and replace with the love which we all agree should really be there.

On Tuesday night at our Christianity Explored meeting we had a lively discussion on the nature of sin and what we believed sin was and how important it was in understanding the world and the gospel. There has been big cultural shifts in our society. We have become less judgemental about some things, particularly sexuality, more judgmental about other things such as racism and

equality; there is less certainty about what is right and wrong; and the reality of God is not at the forefront of culture so people feel it difficult to believe they have wronged God even if they know they have wronged another person. If you stir up guilt and sin as a Christian preacher you are more likely to make the wrong people feel guilty. Yet the Christian gospel still says we need a Saviour because there is something wrong about the world in which we live. Making people fearful and guilty may not be the best and most healthy way to motivate people to change though?

The next day, Wednesday, was International Women's Day and in light of the previous evening's conversation I recalled starting work for Social Services in my early twenties. I made the early observation that there were two types of social worker: one wanted to help people, the other wanted to change society.

My manager was a woman who was a militant feminist. She was never at her desk because she was a member of 11 women's groups and seemed to spend most of her time attending them. I was an unreconstructed northern sexist bloke. A clash was inevitable. Back in Burnley in Lancashire, we greet women with the expression 'love'. 'Thanks love', 'Cheers love', 'oh rite love'. Here's a tip gentlemen. Never call a militant feminist 'love'. Not

unless you are prepared for some grief. My boss challenged my use of sexist, oppressive and demeaning terms and I was dispatched onto the gender awareness course. Turning up at the course I felt like a naughty boy and tried to huddle in the corner with some other naughty boys, hoping for some laddish humour. But as the course went on I became more aware of my cultural assumptions and presuppositions and how I had been shaped by them. Like it said on the tin it was a gender awareness course. I had to first see that there was something wrong that needed to be righted and be given the responsibility to do that. All zealots usually have some truth about what they are promoting or defining.

Facing facts and responding with appropriate thought and action is I believe what following Jesus requires. Asking all the time for that spiritual transformation and the prayer 'Create in me a clean heart'. Our motives are always mixed and never pure, but the purifying of them is the spiritual struggle to maturity in Christ – in which we become more loving: towards God and towards our neighbour. Love is the motivating force.

Jesus' practice, as far as I read in the gospels, was to challenge people in love and graciousness to become more self-aware – of themselves and of God and their lack of love and faith. This was in order to bring about change in

people and in the world. It wasn't to berate people and make them feel mean and dirty but out of love to help them transform.

This chapter 22 in Mathew starts with the parable of the wedding feast which doesn't say what in 21st century Britain we would like it to say. We want to hear a nice story about God throwing a party open to everyone. We want to be 'inclusive', to let everyone in. We don't want to know about judgement on the wicked or about demanding standards of holiness, or about weeping and gnashing of teeth. But the parable Jesus tells has all of that.

The parable was a pointed reference to Israel's leaders and the people who followed them being like guests at a wedding – God's wedding party that he was throwing for his son. But they had refused. They killed the son. So they were thrown out and killed. Now the good news – which wasn't good news for the people originally invited, the ones who rejected the son. God invites anyone to come to the party and they come in droves, especially the undesirables, the prostitutes and tax collectors, the blind and lame, the ones who thought they had been forgotten.

But here comes the surprise. We want to hear that everyone is alright exactly as they are; that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. But, the parable

says, some of the guests are thrown out because they are not wearing the right clothes. Isn't that some sort of social exclusion that you thought the gospel rejects? Well at one level Yes – but the parables don't work at that surface level. The point that Jesus is making is that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. If you refuse to put them on, you are saying that you don't want to stay at the party. That is the reality. You may want to be in the party but you have no serious intention in signing up for all that the party involves.

When Jesus called people he called them as they are and loved them as they are. But his love refused to let them stay as they are. Love wants the best for the beloved. Their lives were transformed, healed, changed.

It is not love to leave people in destructive lifestyles, sin and indifference to God's justice. The loving thing to do is not to say 'well we can't judge – people have to live their own lives'.

Nobody actually believes that God wants everyone to stay exactly as they are? God loves serial killers and child molesters, ruthless and arrogant business people,

manipulative mothers who damage their children's emotions for life. But the point of God's love is that he wants them to change and hates what they are doing and the effect it has on everyone else- and on themselves too. If they don't change they can't remain in the party he's throwing for his son.

Love is the central passion of Jesus. Love for God and love for neighbour. But it isn't a sentimental no questions asked love. It is transformational love that seeks the best for the other because it loves first and foremost God and God's values: justice, peace, righteousness.

May God, through his Spirit, create in us clean hearts so that we can love like Jesus?

Bibliography: T Wright, Matthew for Everyone, SPCK, 2002