

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY OCTOBER 29th

Reading: Matthew 22:34 – 46 [Twenty-first (21) after Pentecost]

Matthew's series of challenges to Jesus in the Temple and during the final week of his life continues. This final part opens with the Pharisees "*having heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees*". Had he? Didn't the previous encounter specifically include them? Not a concern of Matthew's. It is to be noted that these much-loved words of Jesus as to the 'greatest Commandment' are in fact his response to the Pharisees' 'test'. This is the third such topic of encounter in Matthew's Gospel, after the previous challenge of payment of taxes to the foreign rulers and a spurious question about resurrection.

Each of these challenges is established in a '*gathering*' of the Pharisees, both at verse 34 and again in verse 41. New Testament scholar Eugene Boring wonders if there aren't here "*the negative overtimes of the synagogue*", whom we believe Matthew's own receiving community are in conflict with [New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Matthew, page 426].

Jesus is asked a common question of rabbis and teachers, "*Which is the greatest of the commandments?*", in other words, in effect, "*Can you codify or simplify this for us?*" Of course, there is an inherent risk in answering such a question, a danger that Jesus' opponents possibly hoped he would fall into. The rabbis taught, as Jesus quotes earlier in the gospel that all the commandments were equal, that "*not one jot or tittle would pass away without them being fulfilled*" [Matthew 5:18]. There is an echo of this in the letter of Timothy where the author writes, "*All scripture is given by inspiration of God*" [2 Tim 3: 16]. Were Jesus' opponents hoping that he would fall for the 'trap' of seeming to dismiss commands of obedience by elevating one (or some) over others? Boring (above) suggests "*the lawyer may be attempting to draw Jesus into this debate and get him to make some statement that could be interpreted as disparaging toward (some part of) the Law*" [Commentary on Matthew, page 424]. Interestingly Matthew himself, to quote Bill Loader's "First Thoughts on the Gospel Passage from the Lectionary" includes the comment that "*it is revealing that he (Matthew) espouses a clear hierarchy within Scripture on the basis of these two commandments or thoughts similarly expressed*" and notes that there are weightier matters in regard to tithing (23:23).

Jesus' answer – "*love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength*" appears in each of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is a refrain of important texts in the Hebrew scriptures – Deuteronomy 6:5. However, the editorial differences give hint of varying theologies. Mark has a sympathetic scribe ask a genuine question and then commend Jesus' response. Jesus encourages the scribe in the words, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God*" [6:34]. Luke has a 'lawyer' come to test Jesus and upon receipt of the answer asks, 'Who is my neighbour?', which Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. No such in Matthew's quotation of the question and answer – as we have seen above, he places it in the crucial last week of Jesus' life amid conflict and controversy. Matthew edits out Mark's reference to the 'Shema', the traditional Jewish prayer of "*Hear, O Israel*". Are we hearing some echo of the experience of Matthew's own community and its challenge and opposition with synagogue authorities?

Having given this first answer, Jesus then provides a second one. And the second is like it, he says, "*love your neighbour as yourself*." Jesus is not adding an extra layer here. He is actually pairing these two well-known requirements of the law as one inseparable command. To love God IS to love neighbour and vice-versa. All straight out of their tradition [Leviticus 19:18], demonstrating that Jesus is a worthy teacher. But the trick is that it is a both-and, not an either-or response. He has given them a better answer to their question of what the law requires than their own previous understandings!

In response to the religious leader's second challenge to Jesus, the question about paying taxes, Jesus says "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what belongs to God*". As we saw in last week's reflection,

this reply contains a pointed barb, because he knows that they aren't! Their lives and faith do NOT bear the compassion and justice Jesus came to proclaim. Is that same implicit critique beneath these words? In other words, is Jesus subtly pointing out that he knows they aren't keeping what he understands to be the requirements of their own law!

In the continuing verses in Matthew [41 – 46] Jesus turns the tables and asks the Pharisees a question: "Whose son is the Christ?" When they answer 'Son of David', (which is the right confessional response), Jesus replies how can this be when David himself calls the Christ 'Lord'? Again they are silenced. This encounter ends the Pharisees' challenges to Jesus.

The New Interpreter's Commentary notes that this passage quotes "one of the favourite Scripture verses of the early church: Psalm 110:1" ...with 37 appearances, "the most often cited passage in the New Testament" [page 427]. This is likely important worship language of the early Christian church being 'read back' into Jesus' experience with his religious opponents. That same commentary makes the startling point that, in this, for Matthew's community then as us now, "worship is a kind of theological debate with the culture".

Bill Loader in his "First Thoughts" (above) notes that Matthew stands firmly in the prophetic traditions, twice quoting Hosea 6:6: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice". The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary reflections on this passage make the point that the love Jesus speaks of here is "not a matter of feeling, which cannot be commanded in any case, but of commitment and action. It is at the farthest pole from sentimentality and is related to the OT word for 'covenant love' or 'steadfast love' [hesed]. [Commentary on Matthew, page 425].

When the great Martin Luther King Jr travelled to receive his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize he had a London stop-over to preach at St Paul's Cathedral. There he spoke one of his favourite sermons, "Three Dimensions of a Complete Life". In that message, Dr King described, "Love yourself, if that means healthy self-interest... that is the length of life. Love your neighbour as yourself; you are commanded to do that. That is the breadth of life. Bu never forget that there is an event greater commandment, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all the mind This is the height of life."

THEMES: Love of neighbour, obedience, following in truth.
