

Year B Proper 31 Mark 12 28 to 34

It really is fascinating what is going on in this Gospel story today. We often think of Judaism as one uniform belief system but it is not and it was not – just as Christianity is not one uniform belief system. There were, and still are, various groups of Jewish people who hold quite different beliefs. In the Gospel stories, we hear of the Herodians who were politically savvy and aligned themselves with their Roman oppressors. We hear of the Pharisees and the scribes who focused their energy on the written laws and continuously interpreted and added to these laws, creating a spoken body of tradition, to deal with current situations. The Sadducees we hear about were very much tied to the Temple and to temple worship. One of the tenets of their beliefs is that they believed when you are dead, you're dead – there is no resurrection of the dead, no after-life.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, we are hit with stories of these various Jewish parties confronting Jesus, testing him, trying to trick him into revealing himself as a heretic, and – of course – plotting to kill this disruptive upstart. The scribes – who were the experts in Jewish law – are mentioned from beginning to end of Mark's Gospel as being, at best, different and less authoritative than Jesus and, at worst, playing a part in handing Jesus over to death and then mocking him as he hung on the cross.

Suddenly, into the midst of this, appears a scribe who admires Jesus. He has been listening to the way in which Jesus has been answering the challenges of those who oppose him and he likes what he hears. He has just heard Jesus flat out tell a group of Sadducees they are wrong. The Sadducees were trying to trap Jesus in a seemingly unanswerable question about the resurrection when they don't even

believe in the resurrection, and Jesus tells them point blank, “You are quite wrong.”

What those Sadducees had done was to isolate one small piece of Scripture and try to get Jesus to answer a question based on that small bit. They said to Jesus that, in the laws of Moses, a childless widow is supposed to be married to her husband’s brother so that she can have children that will then be raised as if they were the children of the dead husband. So they ask Jesus who’s wife she would be when resurrected if she had ended up having to marry seven brothers, one after the other, because the men kept dying before she could pregnant.

Jesus calls them out on their deliberately deceptive tactic and tells them they don’t know their Scriptures. This tactic of isolating Scripture is still often used by those who want biblical support for various positions but Jesus makes it clear in his answer that this tactic is not the way to truly understand the message of God in Scripture. Jesus gives the Sadducees an answer that takes into account the whole of Scripture – the whole story of the Book of Moses not just the one little law they have quoted him.

At this point, you are probably quite curious about Jesus’ answer to them so I will tell you even though it isn’t actually part of today’s Gospel story. Jesus says to them that they don’t know their Scriptures and, in the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage for they will be like the angels in heaven. He tells them of God’s answer to Moses from the burning bush which is that God is not the God of the dead but of the living and so they are quite wrong about not believing in the resurrection of the dead.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus continues to embrace the Scriptures, all of the Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – by providing us with a sweeping summary of the laws. It is a summary that captures the heart of the Old Testament message.

The admiring scribe, who has just witnessed Jesus' knowledge of the laws of Scripture and his ability to shut down the Sadducees in their misuse of that Scripture, asks Jesus which of the laws – or commandments – is the most important. Jesus quotes for him the *Shema*, found in Deuteronomy, a prayer used daily in Jewish worship: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Jesus doesn't stop there, though. The scribe asked him for one law but Jesus gives him two: "The second is this" he says, "'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" Jesus is, with these words, quoting from Leviticus which, if you have ever read it, will agree with me that is probably the most difficult book to get through unless you're really into reading about the minute details of animal sacrifice and temple worship, and if you're fascinated by such regulations as those for purifying a mouldy house. The overall point to Leviticus, though, is that it lays out in detail how Israel as a society can successfully live according to the two commandments that Jesus has just named for the scribe – love God, love neighbour.

That fact that Jesus gives two commandments when asked for the most important one tells us that they must go together – two sides of the same coin. In fact, when taken together, these two commandments of love God and love

neighbour, cover all 10 of God's commandments given to the people after being liberated from the empire of Egypt.

The scribe wholeheartedly agrees with Jesus' summary of all the law and then, quite unexpectedly adds that loving God and neighbour are "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Perhaps even more unexpected is that Jesus agrees with him.

They seem to be speaking against the Temple worship involving sacrifices but they are not. Jesus is a devout Jew, following their worship schedule and their sacrifices. What the scribe has just discerned from their conversation is something that Jesus teaches throughout the Gospels – it is what is inside the person that counts. You can follow all of the rules and make all of the appointed sacrifices but, if your heart is not truly turned to God then those outward shows of piety are absolutely worthless. Jesus chastises those scribes and the Pharisees honouring God with their lips while their hearts are far from God. This superficial behaviour of theirs is the model placed before the people and Jesus tells them that is simply not good enough. It is actually just a few verses after the end of today's Gospel story that Jesus warns again of outward appearances that do not match the insides: "beware of the scribes," he says, "who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces...and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." Our righteousness, he tells us, must exceed the righteousness of the scribes.

This isn't new. God has been telling us this long before Jesus of Nazareth arrived on the scene and God has been telling us this quite bluntly: "I hate, I despise your feasts," God says, "and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though

you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them” (Amos 5:21-22). Why not? Because outside the temple walls, the people practice greed, they stomp on the poor, swindle the vulnerable in the marketplace, and disregard those who need their help. It is foolhardy to pay lip service to a God who can discern your heart. Paying lip service to God will not earn you a place in God’s kingdom.

And this sheds some light on Jesus’ final comment to the scribe today. “You are not far from the kingdom of God” Jesus tells him. Not far? Jesus agrees with what the scribe has just said and yet doesn’t tell the scribe he is in the kingdom. He tells him he is not far from the kingdom.

Why is the scribe not in the kingdom? Well, Jesus has heard the scribe say the right things but he has not yet seen the scribe do anything that backs up his words. Most of us grew up reciting the two great commandments in our worship services: “This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it” (BCP p.69). And in another worship service we would ask God to help us to “show forth thy praise, Not only with our lips, but in our lives” (BCP p.15). We must continually ask ourselves if we are living these words, are we living what we profess...do we love God wholeheartedly? Do we love our neighbours? Or have we gone down the same path as those Jesus chastises – those who are more talk than action?

Do we say we love our neighbours but we’d prefer not to have certain people darken the church door? Do we say we love our neighbours but have never set foot in a food bank or soup kitchen? Have never had an actual conversation with a homeless person? Have never visited someone in hospital who is not a friend or

relative? How many of us have thrown a dinner party and did not invite friends or family but rather the outcast gathered in from the street? Truly living the two great commandments is absolutely not easy – it is a lot of work and it requires moving outside of our comfort zones. However, together, as the church – Christ’s body – we can be stronger than we are as individuals, more courageous than we are as individuals, more loving than we are as individuals. Together, as the body of Christ we can live the way Jesus lived – with abundant generosity and compassion for everyone and all of creation. So, are we? Are we living outside these walls the way that we tell God we will strive to live in the words we pray inside these walls? We are doing some good things together. There is always room for more and better ways to truly live the two great commandments. Together we will figure out what that “more and better” is.

Jesus says to us, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Not far? Let’s live *in* the kingdom.