

Any questions? Mark 11.12 — 12.44



Sunday March 29th Mark 11.12 — 12.44 Any Questions?

Now one of the experts in the Law came and heard them debating. When he saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”. Jesus answered, “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 strength’. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no-one dared to ask him any question.

The Temple Mount is a huge open space, built on the massive platform of Herod’s Temple. Today it is a sacred site to Muslims, with the beautiful Dome of the Rock built over the rocky outcrop where (tradition has it) Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac (you can read that story in Genesis ch.22). Thronged with pilgrims, then and now — and dotted with shady trees where a teacher can sit down and instruct his disciples, or a preacher gather a crowd.

The Temple is the focus of much of Jesus’ action during the coming week. Like any pilgrim, his first act on entering the city is to go up to the Temple and take a look around (Mark 11.11). Then he and his disciples go back to Bethany, the little village up on the Mount of Olives, where he is staying with friends. The next day, he is back — not as a pilgrim, but as a prophet. Herod’s Temple was a huge commercial enterprise, one of the wonders of the ancient world, drawing in pilgrims from around the world. The pilgrim trade generated a huge income, and the Temple was well

provided with booths for setting shop (you can see some of them today in the excavations) — threatening to overwhelm the whole point of the Temple itself. It's a pattern we're familiar with, as any tourist knows — and it generates its own conflicts. Jesus calls God's people back to basics: first and foremost, the Temple is God's house, *a house of prayer for all nations* — not a short-cut to something else (Mk 11.16-17).

Back to basics: that's really the focus of Jesus' teaching during his final days in Jerusalem. There's a new urgency about this. Right from Day One, Jesus has been proclaiming the coming of God's Kingdom (Mark 1.14-15), and demonstrating in all his words and actions what it means to live in a world where God is King. For the troubled souls he meets along the way, it means healing and wholeness, lives restored, light and salvation and hope. For those who have nothing, it means encountering the riches of God's grace. But for those who have everything, like the rich young man in Mark 10.17-31, it means a challenge: the more you have, the greater the temptation to let your possessions define who you are. The only way to be really secure in who you are, Jesus says, is to let go of everything and follow God's way. It's interesting that here in the Temple, Jesus meets the antithesis of that rich young man who has everything: a poor widow who has nothing, giving her whole life as an offering to God (Mk 12.41-44).

Back to basics — and that means questions. All through Galilee, Jesus has been demonstrating God's Kingdom at work, but strangely asking people to keep quiet about it: Don't tell anyone, he keeps saying. Maybe because he wants time to meet people's needs and deal with people individually; maybe because he is so full of compassion when he sees the needs of the crowds (Mk 6.34, 8.2). They don't need arguments: they need food. And maybe because he wants to give his disciples time to take in and assimilate the significance of what they were seeing — and he knows they are struggling. That's why he sets aside time, on the way down to Jerusalem, to instruct them privately (Mark 9.30-32).

But now he's thrown all caution to the winds. Time is moving to its swift conclusion, and there's an urgency in Jesus' teaching in these last few days. The King has come into his city, and there isn't much time left. I don't remember much about my school chemistry lessons, but I do remember an experiment that involved introducing a glass rod into a solution of potassium permanganate and precipitating a reaction. (Gloriously purple!)

That's what happens when Jesus rides into Jerusalem: it precipitates a reaction among the city's political and religious factions. The political question: "Is it right to pay

taxes to Caesar or not?” (Mk 12.14). The resurrection question (Pharisees believed in it, Sadducees didn’t): “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?” (Mk 12.23). In all the cut and thrust of debate, Jesus never loses sight of the point of all debate, which is not to score points but to learn something about God. “Give to God the things that belong to God” (Mk 12.17). “He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Mk 12.27) Which is the greatest commandment? Love God, and love your neighbour — both equally important (Mk 12.28-34). Keep a hold on those fundamentals, and the differences pale into insignificance (12.34).

These arguments and debates are partly about establishing Jesus’ authority to speak in his Father’s name (12.27-32). But I don’t think they are just staged debates to make a point: they are a reminder to Jesus’ followers that the work of the Kingdom is not limited to salvation for individuals: it includes a call to prophetic engagement with the world. From the outset, Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom implies a prophetic mission to Israel, and Mark’s final chapters show a very deliberate testing of the boundaries of Jesus’ authority, as his journey to Jerusalem brings him into direct confrontation with the religious and political leaders of his day. In a series of prophetic confrontations, Jesus demonstrates his authority to speak on issues that touch on the ordering of civil society and its relations with the wider world: marriage, death, taxation (11.27-12.44). These enigmatic sayings implicitly open up the agenda of the sovereignty of God in public life and on a world stage — which will be explored in chapter 13.

A church which is serious about following Jesus — which takes Jesus’ Kingdom preaching seriously — is a church which sees itself as ‘salt’ and ‘light’ for the whole community (Matt 5.13-16), a mustard seed whose branches reach out wide enough to shelter the world (Mk 4.30-32). Its mission includes a commitment to healing and wholeness for the whole of society (physical, mental and spiritual). It values its civil standing, both locally and nationally, as an opportunity both for advocacy on behalf of the poor and powerless and for the prophetic vocation of speaking truth to power. Followers of Jesus (both collectively and individually) are called to a priestly vocation of asserting the reign of God (not the domination of the church) on behalf of the whole of creation. Christians are called not to withdraw from the world but to exert a prayerful presence in every walk of life and every corner of society. Discipleship is a private commitment with public consequences.

Lord Jesus, true and humble king, you wept over Jerusalem and taught in the city's streets: grant us the faith to know you and love you, that we may be found beside you on the way of the cross, which is the path of glory. Amen.

God bless,

Loveday

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