

The pursuits of the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Saducees contained a lot worthy of commendation. There were few groups among the Jewish community who gave more in service to God. High expectations were held for those who wished to be a part of any of these groups. There were academic and moral expectations that added up to a lifetime of rigerous commitment to God and others. They spent their days seeking to understand Scripture and to serve the religious needs of the community. Despite their oppositional stance toward Jesus in the Gospels, there really was a lot to appreciate. Yet few among them ever really *see* Jesus for who he is.

Growing up in the church, I used to listen to the stories of Jesus held in the four Gospels with a sense of awe at the opportunity presented to those who came in contact with Jesus. The embodiment of ‘grace and truth,’ as John reminds us, was standing there right in front of them. I listened to and learned the stories, but somehow they too often seemed once removed – more a matter of history that of personal encounter. On more than one occasion I recognised a jealousy rising within me: If I had been there in the crowd; if I had been chosen to travel alongside Jesus; if I had heard the parables firsthand - yes, if I had been there I was sure that I would simply have ‘got it’ on a deeper more transformational level. I was just born a couple of millenia too late...so very close.

However, as today’s Gospel reading tells us, there were people who came face-to-face with the one who most accurately reflected the glory of God and did *not* find the encounter transformatonal. Perhaps surprisingly, they were of the groups previously mentioned who took their pursuit of God very seriously indeed. But here they are in our Gospel reading today looking into the divine face and they still do not really *see* the extraordinary man that is among them. Why? What closes their eyes?

In the first encounter we read, the narrator gives us some insight here. Jesus questioners have not sought Jesus in order to learn. They, along with their unlikely partners, the politically astute Herodians, are here to trap. Such an alliance reflects the political threat Jesus is becoming and makes sense of the nature of their question. The trap intended for Jesus only darkens their blindness.

They begin with the respectful ‘Teacher’ – acceptable, but certainly not the equivalent of ‘Lord’ as the disciples are fast recognising - but continue with a shallow flattery:

‘...we know you are a man of integrity who teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.’

Rhetorical niceties to be sure, but perhaps these things are actually true. If they are they are a very good reason to listen to this one. Few in our world are not aligned with one group or another. We too so easily gravitate – like the Pharisees - to those who bolster our own opinions and we distance ourselves from those who do not. We could write such realities off as ‘merely human’ - but for the fact that Jesus is really the most human of us all. The more we are swayed by others the less accurately we are able to see.

There trap is a classic. The tax question centres on their relationship with Rome. The Herodians had a relatively close alliance with the Empire. If Jesus were not careful his answer may spread beyond his immediate audience and give birth to significant danger. There is a simplicity to the question implying only two possibilities – either yes or no. Either way, there is a group that will be very interested to know what this particular ‘Teacher’ is teaching. Perhaps there is a wise life policy here: If the question only allows two possibilities – the questioner may be out to catch you!

So they finally ask, ‘Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’

You know the story. Jesus sees a third way – and recognises that the Denarius used to pay tax *belonged* - as Caesar insisted - to Caesar. After all it is his contrivercial and blasphemous image that resides on the coin with which the Empire’s tax must be paid. Jesus questioners - not Jesus himself - produce and, we presume, deal in the Emporor’s currency. Producing Caesar’s coin so readily reveals the duplicity that Jesus has just named: ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?’

‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’ Deal with Caesar and you will deal in this currency. Deal with God and you deal in another – the offering of your entire lives in service to the Trinity. The questioners are stunned, speechless and. I presume, embarassed. Their revealing response is to walk away. They stood before the Christ but, sadly, when he showed them themselves they could only hide once again. Again, how foreign is such an attitude for us?

The Saducees fair not better in their encounter. They approach Jesus with a question that is really irrelevant to them, seeking to illustrate the unworkability of the doctrine of the resurrection. They seek to expose Jesus’ ignorance with their public question. But their well known denial of the resurrection really reveals their motives. For them this question really does not even exist. Their’s is purely a question to draw Jesus into a long running religious debate. They tell a convoluted and unlikely story (possibly with origins in the Apocryphal book of Tobit) of a woman who is married to seven brothers over her lifetime. Their question links the Levitical legal requirement of social provision for a widow by the dead man’s family through remarriage to assumed details of resurrection life. Their question: if we follow this law, ‘Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?’

I love Jesus answer: Your error stems from an ignorance of Scripture *and* of the power of God. In the pursuit of truth God has spoken – and continues to speak – through God’s word. It remains a wonderfully rich resource that we ignore to our peril. As the Psalmist says: ‘Your word is a light to my path’ (Ps 119). One of the many reasons I celebrate the Anglican service is the place that Scripture holds. And – when heard well – it constantly reminds us of the power of God – a power beyond our imagining. God’s plans, power and questions are beyond the limitations of our own.

Initially Jesus makes a parallel between the state of the angels and resurrected people. However, he quickly moves on to their real question – the resurrection of the dead. His challenge – ‘Have you not read?’ implies that the Bible really does indicate the power of God manifest in the conquering of even death itself and that these theologians are missing this remarkable reality. Perhaps they are sadly limited to what they can explain. For Jesus, God is the God of the living. Yes, Jesus knows and names their motives but can also take their question seriously. For him the resurrection is a hoped for reality for all people. Again Jesus wisdom is so rare that it both amazes and silences.

There is a third encounter in our reading of the New Testament today. It is once removed from the face-to-face encounters we have already seen. In that respect, I think I relate to it a little more easily. I refer to Paul’s memories of how the Gospel message was received by the people of Thessalonica. Paul, right at the beginning of his letter celebrates their work that is growing out of their openness to the Gospel message. They are living out their faith, love and hope. The Good News settled on good soil in Thessalonica arriving in the form of a humble message accompanied by evidence of the power of God: Word and Spirit. They saw how Paul lived, and responded to his message with a deep and genuine imitation that has lasted beyond Paul’s physical presence among them. Though they faced genuine suffering and persecution they embraced the message, and the Spirit and God is making them into a remarkable people. Their story – their living response – has spread – and become, in itself, an argument for God’s action in the life, death and resurrection of the Jesus they worship. Without even knowing it, they have become an international model of discipleship. On hearing the Gospel, they moved from lifeless idolatry to a life of active service to the living God. Clearly this was a transformational encounter.

Of course, this is not to suggest that somehow the Thessalonians have arrived. They will always have the need to learn – and therefore to be open. Paul writes his letters to encourage, teach and – where necessary to rebuke. But the message of Jesus is growing among them. They are learning to love God and people more deeply, richly and completely. Their openness is paying off.

So what is the difference here? Why did some see – even if they were not there – and some not see – even though they had Jesus right in front of them? At least in part it was to do with openness, humility and an honest seeking after truth. Jesus questioners, somehow, are not really asking.

As we hold these stories together, I wonder if they add up to an important message of humility. The Pharisees, Herodians and the Sadducees knowledge, learning and debates distracted them – effectively blinding them to what was right in front of them. There is something wonderfully simple in the message of Jesus that we all too readily complicate. This is not to say that there is anything noble in oversimplification or in maintaining ignorance. But we are a people rooted in a communicable story that always remains beyond the mere extent of our explanations (again?). We are grounded in the miracle of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Where this manifests itself as mere theological knowledge - defining ourselves over against the other - we too risk losing sight of the miracle of God among us.

It is in coming together around Jesus' table and humbly sharing there our experiences that we are most likely to begin the lifelong process of removing these scales from our eyes. May we, as we gather, be a people who cultivate open hearts to the Word and Spirit, genuinely asking and genuinely listening. Amen.