

Luke 20:27-40 PASSING MUSTER

Sometimes, in the interests of brevity, our lectionary leaves out verses which are actually important to our understanding of certain passages. Today's Gospel reading in Luke 20 skips the first 26 verses - which to my mind are important in helping us understand the passage that's set. So let me fill in the gap a little. We'll find as we look briefly at the chapter, that there things that speak to us about the way we relate to fellow believers in our own time.

Verse 1 of chapter 20 sets the scene for us. It tells us that Jesus was in the Temple (in Jerusalem), teaching the people and preaching the good news, when the heavies came and confronted him. The heavies were the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the elders.

Translated to our setting, it might be like a party made up of a group of archdeacons, rectors and lay ministers all confronting the visiting preacher at the cathedral. That could be pretty intimidating.

During this encounter, three conflicts arose between the religious leaders and Jesus, and they were all connected.

The first conflict was over Jesus' authority.

In verses 1-8, the heavies demanded to know by whose authority Jesus taught and did the things he did. "Tell us, what right do you have to do these things? Who gave you such right?" they demanded.

They wanted his qualifications; his background. He unsettled them, so they were looking for a way to undermine him. Perhaps if he didn't have the right pedigree, or a bachelor of theology from the right theological college – they'd be able to discredit him!

It's easy for us to leave this story in the pages of the Gospels, thinking how small minded and dense these leaders were. But it speaks to us as well.

When I was at Theological college, one of the subjects I did touched on the differences between the various Christian denominations. I remember the lecturer talking about some of the huge mega-churches that had sprung up overseas. It was interesting that one of the key points he made about these churches was not the great impact they

were having on their communities, but that so many of their pastors had no theological qualifications!

And that's not an uncommon attitude. Wherever there is a move of God, there are followers and there are critics. We need to be careful that we don't write off a person, or a church – or perhaps even a move of God in our midst - because the people concerned may not meet our traditional, or academic or social expectations.

The second conflict was over who owned the Kingdom.

Verses 9-26 tell the story about the wicked vinedressers.

You'll remember the story - a landowner left his vineyard in the care of tenants while he was away. When the time came for the harvest, and for him to collect his share, he sent his slaves to do that. The tenants killed each of the slaves, and then they killed the landowner's son as well.

Jesus questions to them was, **“What, will the owner of the vineyard do to the tenants? He will come and kill those men, and turn the vineyard over to other tenants.”**

When the people heard this, they said, "Surely not!" They were shocked, because they got the analogy.

The vineyard was Israel to whom God gave a land so that they would go and bear fruit. The slaves were the prophets that God sent to harvest that fruit. In this story, Jesus reminded them they killed all the prophets and then inferred that they would kill him too.

What really ticked them off was that not only was Jesus accusing them of killing the prophets and rebelling against God, he was casting himself in the story as the son, so claiming to be the Son of God. They were ready to lynch him on the spot!

Jesus is speaking here about the basic problem of ownership – one that is just as present in today's church. Who does the Vineyard belong to? In other words, to who does the Kingdom of God belong to? Who's right?

The chief priests & teachers of the Law thought it belonged to them; that they had sole right to interpret it, and to grant entry – or not – to God's kingdom.

The Christian Church over the centuries has done the same thing. Throughout its history, there have been times when various denominations have acted as if the Kingdom of God belonged solely to them.

I caught the tail end of a news report on SBS last night - the Pope had visited Georgia in Russia. He offered the hand of fellowship to all. Though he was very well received in that mainly secular community - there were members of the traditional Orthodox Church gathered there in protest, claiming the Catholic church had distorted the truth - way, way back, all those centuries ago, when the Church initially split.

Who does the Kingdom belong to?

This, then, leads into the third conflict, which is all about owning the truth about God - that tendency we have to know that we are right, and that people who disagree with us are wrong.

There was a sect within Judaism called the Sadducees. They believed that there was no resurrection. They had a tricky question for Jesus: **“If a woman in the course of her life went through seven husbands, whose wife was she in the resurrection?”**

Jesus answered the question by saying that heaven was a different realm – there wouldn’t be marriage in heaven as we know it on earth.

Though Jesus treated the Sadducees’ question seriously and gave them an answer, it is more likely that the motivation behind the question was to find out what Jesus’ theological stance was on the resurrection – an issue which was at the centre of the Sadducees’ belief. It was a question asked to determine whether Jesus was of their fold - or not.

The question is in a category with some of the questions we ask today.

"Are you a creationist or an evolutionist?"

“Are you an evangelical or a liberal?”

“Do you believe in climate change or not?”

“Are you for or against same sex marriage?”

And so it goes. We all have certain questions we could use to rate another person's grasp of what we believe is the Truth. On the basis of

their answer, we can dismiss them or include them. We can decide whether they are off the rails, or whether they're one of us.

When we look at the ministry of Jesus, one thing that stands out is that he rose above the prejudices of his day. He had women who were part of his inner circle – that was something totally unheard of in Rabbinic circles. He valued children. He ate with 'sinners', and mixed with the ill and the handicapped. In fact, he focused on them! He touched lepers and honoured the poor. He broke down the barriers between Samaritan & Jew and Jew & Gentile.

What this chapter reminds us of is that we need to be aware of our own prejudices and the values by which we judge others.

When Jay and I had been married a few years, and were members of an active but rather black & white church, I remember getting a random phone call one day that went something like this: "Hi. I'm from the gay & lesbian choir in this region. We've just lost our conductor, and we wondered if you'd consider taking us on?"

My response? After I'd recovered from my initial shock, I said politely, "I really don't agree with that sort of thing. Sorry, I can't help you."

As I've grown in my faith, I've thought about that incident more than once, with considerable regret. I've wondered what my response might have said to that person about the love of God, and about their value as a person.

I've thought about Jesus and his friendship with Mary Magdalene. When she came to him, infested with demons, did he say to her, "Oh dear. I really don't approve of your lifestyle. Sorry, I can't help you." Did he say that? No, he didn't. He showed her the unconditional love of God. Through Jesus' love, Mary found healing, forgiveness and salvation. She became part of that small band of believers who, because they were transformed by Jesus' love, were able to transform the world. Let's bring this closer to home.

Before long, we may find ourselves involved in a plebiscite regarding same sex marriage. Many who oppose the plebiscite do so on the grounds that it will polarise people; that it will make them take sides, that it will pit people against each other, who are at present living peaceably,

side by side. They may well be right - such behaviour would be consistent with human nature.

As Christians, we need to be very careful that we don't distance ourselves from those we disagree with, or even worse, condemn them. Jesus didn't. He loved people into the Kingdom.

We need to ask ourselves often, if the labels we attach to others are labels which potentially exclude them from our circle or our regard, or worse, if they prevent us from sharing with them the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Let's be courageous enough - godly enough - to see beyond a person's political or theological beliefs, to see past their social preferences or economic circumstances, and to see them as Jesus sees them: people of infinite value; people for whom he gave his life; people he binds together, through his blood, to become his very own body.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

Let me close with a couple of lines from poet Edwin Markham

"They drew a circle that shut me out, heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win, We drew a circle that took them in."

Let's pray...

Father, thank you for the challenge and encouragement of this passage. By your grace, may we be so filled with your Spirit, that our relationships are marked by the same acceptance, inclusion and love that you bestow upon us; through Christ our Lord. **Amen**