

## Controversy – Mark 12:1-44

Throughout the whole of this chapter there runs a note of hostility and tension – the underlying theme being the authority of Jesus, which we heard about in last week’s lecture. What we have before us then is a series of conflict stories – here Jesus’ teaching, not just his activity, is coming under scrutiny. He both responds to controversial questions and traps laid by the religious leaders but also needles them by creating controversy.

### 1. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

- Ask for someone to read it ( vss 1 – 12)
- This is an allegorical story (a piece of writing – a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one) about the failure of Israel’s religious leaders to accept God’s messengers
- It has so many resonances with the past, notably with a long line of prophets who have told similar stories with similar intent. Chief amongst them is Isaiah, who in Chapter 5 wrote a song about a vineyard (Israel itself)- the people who should have produced the fruit of justice and right living but who instead produced the wild grapes of wickedness and violence (5:7)
- The parable ends with the punishment of the tenants and the meaning is clear – those who reject God’s messengers will themselves be rejected; and others will inherit the vineyard.
- Underneath it all Jesus is here explaining why He has done what He has done in the Temple. The Temple will be destroyed, but His kingdom-work will go on and be justified by events. This time the echo is Psalm 118:22-23 (the same Psalm as they sang when Jesus entered Jerusalem Mk 11:9) which speaks of a stone, lying perhaps in a builders’ yard, but the wrong shape to fit anywhere in the wall. Only when the builders get to the very top, and look for a cornerstone – the keystone of an arch – do they realise too late that the stone that they ignored is the very stone they now need. What does this mean? Various interpretations – but perhaps
- Jesus is saying that he has come to Jerusalem with the message of God’s kingdom, but this message simply doesn’t fit into the ‘building’ of Judaism the way in which the present builders (the chief priests, Herod, the Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes) have been constructing it. They will realise too late that Jesus belongs at the foundation or at the very top of the building (cornerstone – *κέφαλη γωνίας* literally ‘the head of the corner’) can mean either. By then it will be too late – the current tenants will have been destroyed and the vineyard given to others.
- NB The reaction of the religious leaders v12 – this really is the turning point – the point of no return for Jesus – the reference to the sending of a beloved son albeit veiled would make them realise that Jesus was making a messianic claim and this seals both Jesus’ fate and their own.
- So they want to arrest him – Jesus’ teaching produces the same result as his actions of cleansing the Temple had (11:18). This is full of dramatic irony – the parable of the wicked tenants is acted out in the passion narrative which follows: - in seeking to destroy Jesus the authorities only succeed in destroying themselves.
- Refer to the questions on the slide

## 2. A trick question about paying taxes

- Ask someone to read it (vss 13 – 17)
- Who were the Pharisees and Herodians?

The Pharisees were a strict religious sect of mostly ordinary Jews – not priests – who were strict observers of the Law – the Torah (the first 5 books of the OT) - and the guardians of the oral traditions that scholars developed over generations.

The Herodians were a group that supported the Roman leader, King Herod Antipas, who reigned from 4 BC to AD 39 in exchange for political favour and peace. The Herodians were the opposite extreme of the Zealots of the time, who believed God alone should lead Israel and resorted to activism and military opposition to end Roman control.
- The next four questions show Jesus teaching with authority (the authority claimed in 11:27 - 33 last week) by dealing with every possible kind of question. Jesus demonstrates his superiority to everyone who opposes or questions him because unlike theirs, his is an authority from heaven. These questions unpack at the historical level the story depicted in allegorical form in the parable of the vineyard.
- The story centres on the payment of the κηνσόσ or poll tax, a tax imposed on the population of Judaea, Samaria and Idumaea in AD6 when these districts became a Roman province under the rule of a procurator – this was regarded by the Jews as an outrageous act of interference by foreign rulers, and in time gave rise to the revolt of AD70.
- The trap is clear: if Jesus sides with the Jews who opposed the tax he would be denounced to the Romans and arrested as a political agitator; if he sides with the Romans he will lose popular support. Jesus' smart-ass reply accepts the legitimate demands of the Roman government (those who use Roman coins clearly owe some kind of allegiance to Caesar), but switches our attention to the more important demands of God.
- Looking back to the previous parable Jesus is making the subtle and controversial point that the religious leaders have consistently refused to give God what they should.
- Although it is tempting to see this story as saying that church and state are separate entities this is very much a later idea which only gained ground in the eighteenth century. Jewish thought at the time of Jesus, and Christian thought as it emerged within Judaism, has always seen the entire world as created by one God. All aspects of it fall under his sovereign rule.
- Refer to the questions on the slide

### 3. Another trick question about the resurrection

- Ask someone to read vss18 – 27
- This odd little story, which continues the theme of controversy, takes some explanation!!
- Who were the Sadducees?

The Sadducees were the Jewish priestly aristocracy. They tended to be wealthy and held powerful positions, including that of chief priests and high priest, and they held the majority of the 70 seats of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin. They worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of Rome. Religiously, the Sadducees were more conservative in one main area of doctrine. The Pharisees gave oral tradition equal authority to the written Word of God, while the Sadducees considered only the written Word to be from God, and especially the Torah. They were thus conservative in outlook, distrusting anything new and progressive.
- Whilst the Pharisees entertained the idea of resurrection (Acts 23:6) the Sadducees vehemently opposed it. Why? Resurrection – God bringing dead people back to life – might mean a root-and-branch transformation of the whole world, and there was no guarantee that those who were presently in power would retain it in the new world. In fact, as Jesus had been saying frequently, the likelihood was that those in the front would end up at the back and vice versa. If people started believing that sort of nonsense the Sadducees reckoned there was no knowing what they might go and do. So in order to rubbish an idea they are frightened of, they tell a silly story to show how ridiculous it is.
- They come up with the story of the childless wife with seven husbands and ask, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be? The question is based on the law about levirate marriage in Deut 25:5-10, whereby Moses taught that if a man leaves a wife but no children, his brother should marry that woman in order to raise up children. The law was intended to provide a man with heirs who would preserve his name and inherit his property. The Sadducees point is that it is clear from this that Moses did not believe in the resurrection.
- Jesus' reply falls into 2 parts:

Firstly – he says that the whole point of the resurrection is that it isn't just a coming back into the present life, with its marrying and childbearing. In God's new world, those who rise from the dead will be like the angels: they won't need to marry, because there will be no more death, and no need for more children.

Secondly – Jesus deals with the real issue behind the question – whether or not the dead will be raised. Because the import of the Sadducees question is that Moses did not believe in the resurrection Jesus takes them to the story of the burning bush where God declares to Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and we know that he is God of the living and not the dead.
- Jesus says that the Sadducees understand neither the power of God (presumably to raise the dead) or the scriptures, especially the book of Exodus. God was launching through Jesus, his sovereign saving rule, and everything was going to be turned upside down by it. The Sadducees' power base, the temple, was going to be overthrown, and God was going to set up Jesus himself and his followers as the new radical alternative. This would be a bit like 'resurrection' in advance: God's new life, on earth as in heaven.
- Refer to the questions on the slide

#### 4. A question about the law

- Ask someone to read vss 28 – 34

- Who were the scribes?

The scribes were neither a sect nor a political party. They were the experts in the Law and are also called lawyers or teachers. They both copied and interpreted the Law and applied it to everyday life.

- Mark portrays this scribe as an honest questioner in search of truth, which is surprising given the hostility shown to Jesus by scribes elsewhere in Mark's Gospel.
- The question put to Jesus was commonly discussed by the rabbis. The issue was not which of the commandments was the most important (since all were important and must be kept), but whether there was some basic principle from which the whole Law could be derived.
- Jesus' reply by itself was fairly unremarkable. For Jesus to answer with the matchless 'Shema' prayer from Deut 6:4-5 recited daily by pious Jews – 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength' – and then to append Leviticus 19:18 'love your neighbour as yourself' was quite a safe answer.
- Note that it is the legal expert still no doubt pondering what Jesus did when he cleansed the Temple who goes one little but all-important step further. He ponders, 'If you really love God and your neighbour as yourself you won't need the sacrificial system at all will you?' Mark doesn't say that Jesus smiled, but he might have been forgiven for so doing. The deep understanding of the legal expert was exactly in line with the deep understanding of Jesus himself about the whole purpose of his mission. Like the Sabbath (a sign-post pointing forward to the great 'rest', the restoration of the whole creation); the food-laws designed to keep Israel pure until the time when purity of heart was at last to be attainable; so too the Temple itself was designed by God as a temporary symbol until the ultimate reality had arrived. The whole point of Jesus' kingdom proclamation was that the time of waiting was over (1:15). Jesus is now offering to anybody and everybody who will hear and believe, the reality to which the temple was a sign-post.
- The kingdom of God is the new reality in which those who believe will love God with every fibre of their beings and their neighbours as themselves – the Temple is redundant.
- In Jesus' eyes the scribe is not far from the kingdom – his attitude is the right one. By endorsing Jesus' words the scribe has proved he is on the right track.
- This passage enables us to understand more fully what Jesus thought his work was all about, and how his overall mission was bound to challenge the centrality of the Temple and its sacrificial system – a highly controversial, not to say, dangerous thing to suggest. Jesus really did believe that through his kingdom-mission Israel's God would enable people to worship and love him and to love one another in a new way, the way promised by the prophets, the way that stemmed from renewed hearts and lives.
- Refer to the questions on the slide

## Jesus asks a Question about David's son

- Ask someone to read vv35-37
- Jesus now poses a question himself about Messiahship – how does it fit in with the other bits of this Chapter?
- Is this a denial of Jesus' descent from David? Probably not because elsewhere in Mark 10:47 Jesus is called Son of David. So probably not a denial of Jesus' Davidic descent but
- An affirmation of Jesus' Lordship, which made him superior to the political Messiah of Jewish patriotic hopes and superior even to David himself. There is no excuse for those who fail to see Jesus as their Lord.
- cf Romans 1:3f where we hear that Jesus was descended from David according to the flesh; but designated 'Son of God' in power according to the Spirit. So 'Son of David' and 'Son of God' are complementary truths – Jesus Davidic descent is not denied but the fact that He is 'Son of God' is much more important.
- The quote is from Psalm 110:1 – and the argument depends on the belief that it was written by David himself (it's probably a lot later than David).
- This passage implies that Jesus is to be seen as 'Lord'. It reminds us of Malachi 3:1, which speaks of the Lord coming to his temple. It's significant that it is in the Temple that Jesus comes closer to revealing his true identity in Mark than anywhere else.
- Refer to the questions on the slide

## Jesus attacks the Teachers of the Law

- Ask someone to read vss 38-40
- Hypocrisy is what Jesus is condemning here. Certainly as we've seen, vss28-34 show that not all scribes were guilty of hypocrisy, but Jesus is critical of those who show false piety, acting as a cloak to injustice.
- Once again there are echoes of Malachi where the Lord comes in judgment to the Temple
- The scribes apparently wore a particularly long version of the *tallith* or outer garment when they were at prayer or engaged in carrying out their duties. They are condemned here for parading their religion in order to be seen and admired.
- Another group of scribes exploit the poor - ie 'devour widows' houses' and they are worthy of even greater condemnation because those who parade their piety are guilty of silly ostentation but those who oppress the defenceless are certainly failing not only to love God but their neighbours also and thus will receive the greater condemnation.
- Refer to the questions on the slide

### **The widow's gift**

- Ask someone to read vv 41-44
- In contrast to the men who exploit poor widows we have the widow who sacrifices all she has.
- Jesus commends the widow for her offering. How does this foreshadow his own coming sacrifice?
- What we know in theory but often forget in practice is that what counts is not the amount but the proportion. The rich shell out large sums but it's a small percentage; the widow put in a tiny sum but the maximum percentage. She was prepared to go without herself, rather than stint on giving what she could to God.
- The illustration of true worship and generosity shown by the widow stands in sharp contrast not only to the rich who gave large sums but a small percentage, but also to the scribes condemned for their ostentatious piety in the previous section.
- As a result of her total self-giving the widow becomes the example par excellence of that total love for God about which Jesus was speaking earlier in the chapter.
- Why is this incident placed here? Well it's the last story before Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple; and it links back to the story about loving God and the neighbour. Perhaps Jesus is saying that the reality to which the Temple points is in place – someone who loves God with every fibre of their being – therefore it has served its temporary purpose.
- God's generosity to us is that he gave himself. How much do we truly give back of ourselves to him?
- Refer to questions on the slide