

Mt 22:34-46 – “Good to ask Questions”

Rules, rules, rules! Everywhere you turn, another rule! There ought to be a rule about no more rules! (I'll let that sink in for a second...)

But seriously, life has gotten awfully complex and evermore full of rules, hasn't it? Sometimes we long for the “good old days” when life was much simpler, and there were fewer rules. Mind you, the old days sometimes weren't all that ‘good’ either, and should we go far enough back to when the rules were really, really few and far between, we discover that life was rather brutal. You know, back to a time when the rules were pretty much covered by, “I rule! If you don't do what I say I'll stomp you!”. Come to think of it, we don't have to go too far back to find those kind of rules!

However, there are good and sensible reasons why we develop more and more rules, although it sometimes seems the main reason for more rules is that we break the ones we have. To handle a rule being broken, we develop more rules defining how we should handle the person who broke the rule. Ultimately we spawn a whole legal industry to carefully tailor ever more rules and laws.

Once we add religion into the mix, there is no end to the rules. Take the Old Testament for example, which moves from one rule (don't eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of life) – which was immediately broken – to ten rules – which were immediately broken – and then on to the hundreds and hundreds of rules determining and controlling every aspect of life, all of which were sooner or later (usually sooner) broken.

When those two streams, religion and law, come together all limits to reasonableness seem to go out the window. The creativity in rulemaking that comes when the law of the land is replaced with the law of religion throws away all limits to the number and complexity of rules. All of us who live on this planet do so under systems of laws and rules, and the more rigid the hierarchy, the more the rules are enforced. Not only gangs and bands, but the really tough guys – the holy empires, ancient and modern, have very strict and strictly enforced rules.

It's easy to understand why people who live subject to such strict systems are reluctant to work towards change, especially since the most stringent rules are reserved to suppress any change. Funny, though, isn't it how there always seem to be exemptions from the rules for those most responsible for enforcing them, and especially exemptions for those who design and implement them? One of the strongest rules used to preserve the power structure is usually the rule of “don't ask any questions”. This happens even in, or especially in, religion. Ever notice that the churches who claim to have all the answers are the very ones who don't allow any real questions?

We see a bit of this when we look at today's reading, an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were feeling threatened by this man who came questioning their authority, and they gathered to try to trap him. One of them, a lawyer we are told, asks Jesus a trick question to test him. We could, I guess, suppose some decent motives on the part of the lawyer, but given that this incident is one of a series that Matthew has grouped together, all dealing with controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities it would seem more likely that the testing was more than a little hopeful of discrediting Jesus, of catching him uttering a ‘wrong’ answer. The question is “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”.

Now even if we remember that there are some serious rules, like being stoned to death for eating shellfish, when we hear this question we tend to think immediately of the

Big Ten, the commandments given to the people by God through Moses. It really was a trick question, but still we can't help wondering which one of the ten is the 'biggie'.

Jesus surprises us, and no doubt the Pharisees also, with his answer. Instead of picking one from the Big Ten, Jesus joins two commandments from elsewhere in the Torah, the Shema from Deuteronomy (6:5) and another from Leviticus. We like to think that every good saying originated with Jesus, but in truth these two commandments had been joined by rabbis long before Jesus. What is important for us as Christians, of course, is the stamp of authority placed upon the joining of these two commandments by Jesus' endorsement and declaration that the combined concepts not only formed the most important commandment, but that indeed all of what was then Scripture was dependent on that joint concept. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." That's what his declaration means, namely that the entire Scripture, what we now call the Old Testament, derives from and is dependant upon these two commandments. The fact that this declaration was made by the one whose death and resurrection brought into being the New Testament gives his response the authority of God, and we too are called to learn this saying and to write it upon our hearts – to live it out with all of who we are.

In a wonderful two-dimensional image these two commandments merge to completely define our response in faith. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." calls us to focus everything that is part of us toward heaven, toward the God who created us, who has patiently over the millennia taken the initiative to enter into a holy covenant with his people. This first command gives us a simple entry point into the tangled complexity of life and faith. Difficult to implement properly, but we as people were never very good at following commands in any event – that's why God had to and still has to come to our rescue. Difficult to implement, but oh-so-easy to understand. This is the simplest of rules: with all that you are. No conditional clauses, no wiggle room, no need for further rules to define what is meant by 'all of you'. It means, "all of you". Love the Lord your God with everything you've got, with all who you are. We may not like the full implications, but the meaning of Jesus' answer was pretty clear.

And then we come to the second part of this concluding episode between Jesus and the authorities, and Matthew makes it very clear that it is a conclusion. Jesus fires a question back at his attackers that they were not able to answer. In fact, what Jesus did was something that causes pretty much the same kind of reaction today, especially in the more Pharisaic implementations of the church, those segments where questions are not usually welcome. If we look at WDJD (that's What Did Jesus Do? as compared to the more popular but less reliable WWJD – What Would Jesus Do?) we see that Jesus used a proof text from scripture to poke a hole in the Pharisees' proof-texting from scripture, and if you try that it will earn you the same kind of stony silence today that it did then.

Some faithful Christians today use this concluding statement from Matthew as a justification for not asking – or even allowing – any questions, fearing perhaps that to ask serious questions of Jesus is somehow a kind of disrespect. What could be further from the truth? It is clear from scripture that Jesus was more than willing, even eager, to enter into dialogue with anyone who was seeking the truth, who was yearning to learn more about God and God's will for us. And Jesus was abundantly clear from his 'ultimate commandment' that God's will is that we should love God with all that we are, and love each other with that same intensity and depth.

That's not a very satisfying answer for those who rely upon rules to keep others in line, is it? That commandment is not very satisfying for those who use the fear of God like a whip to bring fearful others into line; who use ribbons of proof texts from scripture to bind up others, rendering them powerless slaves; who use the Bible like a club to beat others into meek submission as diligent followers of themselves.

No, this answer from Jesus is much more powerful than that, offering to anyone who has ears to hear an immense freedom, and a deep and significant challenge – the freedom, and the challenge, to accept being loved by God as the starting point and foundation for being, for living. Loving your neighbour as yourself begins with loving yourself, which in turn begins with understanding how you are loved by Christ, with a love that stretched to the cross, to the tomb, and to the tomb emptied by the resurrecting power of God in Jesus. Love God with all that you are, with a love fuelled not by fear but by the glorious understanding of the love with which God loves you, a love shown so clearly in the redeeming sacrifice of his own Son, Christ our Lord.

It's good to ask questions in your faith. There is nothing, not even questions, says Paul in Romans 8 that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God's love for you is secure, you cannot shatter it, or sever it with questions. And you can be assured that you will receive an answer to your questions from Jesus, a life-giving, sustaining answer of faith and love that is so different from the stony silence offered by the Pharisees of old and the "sit down, shut up, no more questions!" answer from the Pharisees of today. "I will send the comforter, the Holy Spirit, to guide you into all truth", Jesus promised, a promise sealed in the dramatic events of Pentecost, and confirmed by his answer of love even today.

Ask away ... it is very good to ask questions, and you have the promise of Christ our Lord that you will even be provided with the answers.