

Questions and signs (Luke's story)

Study Two



Marten van Valckenborch, Parable of the wicked husbandmen, c1585

Opening Chat...

What influences your charitable giving, and what might deter you from giving to a particular cause?

Key verse...

‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away,’
(Luke 21:33)

Going undercover...

(Read Luke 20:9-26)

Luke’s narrative takes off from where Mark left us, with the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law trying to get Jesus to state where his authority came from. They were afraid to admit the truth and say nothing, so Jesus turns to the people gathered around and tells a story, a parable aimed directly at the temple leaders, as it not only affirms Jesus’ authority but also hints toward his coming death.

It is a parable that adapts ‘The song of the vineyard’ from Isaiah 5, a folk song about a beautifully created vineyard which should have given a yield of excellent quality grapes, but only produced a useless crop. Jesus’ listeners no doubt enjoyed the story until he revealed the vineyard to be Israel, the owner God, and his son, Jesus. The tenants are the

religious leaders whose task is to cultivate the religious life of Israel (which they are failing to do), and the servants in the story are the prophets whose word was so often ignored.

In his closing remarks, Jesus takes another well-known passage and applies it to himself. The message is plain, that by rejecting him they are rejecting God’s only way of Salvation. Jesus can be a stepping-stone or a stumbling stone, a choice everyone must make, but not the answer they want to hear!

So, what do the temple leaders do? They keep a watchful eye on Jesus, but according to Luke go a step further by sending in undercover agents to not only spy on him but attempt to infiltrate his closest followers, looking for Jesus to say enough to convict himself. Their

question is an attempt to divert Jesus onto the greater political question of Roman rule. No-one liked Tax collectors or paying tax, so should they really be giving their money to Caesar? A wrong answer and they could hand Jesus to the Roman authorities and wipe their hands of him.

But Jesus makes a valid point for all citizens. That they have Roman coins in their pockets shows a tacit acceptance of any such claims by the occupying powers. Only God is worthy of worship, but just because they have a

relationship with God does not mean that they are above the demands of the secular state and its many responsibilities, including the welfare of its citizens, which requires taxation. Paul was clear about this, saying that the authorities are God's servants who give their time to governing, and we should give to everyone that which we owe them (Romans 13:6,7).

Discussion...

- 1: Jesus' parable about the vineyard is all about a failure to recognise the importance of the prophets of the past, including John the Baptist, in the bigger story of God's purposes. What is it that his hearers had missed, and could we be guilty of the same?
- 2: Thinking about that stone the builders rejected, how can Jesus be a stumbling stone to those looking for answers to the big questions in life?
- 3: So, what is your own view on taxation?
- 4: Jesus talks of giving to God what is God's. How does that impact on our daily life?

The questions keep coming...

(Read Luke 20:27-47)

Among Jesus' opponents were the Pharisees and Sadducees, and it is worth recapping on these two groups. The Pharisees (meaning 'separated ones') were a small Jewish sect (around 6,000 strong) mainly remembered for their strict adherence to the finer points of the law, frequent clashes with Jesus, and in the past being criticised by him for being hypocrites.

The Sadducees only accepted the authority of the first five books of Scripture and denied all things supernatural. They were a small but wealthy sect, and in Herod's day had control of the temple. The Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection, the Sadducees did

not. The two groups had almost nothing in common other than their opposition to Jesus. John the Baptist had called them 'a brood of vipers' awaiting judgement, which must have hurt those who considered God's anger was mainly for Gentiles and not Jews.

So, the Sadducees look for a flaw in the concept of resurrection with a rather hypothetical example of a woman whose many husbands, all brothers, keep dying, and therefore whose wife will she be at the resurrection? Jesus' answer, a little complex at first reading, asks them to consider two things. Firstly, they are thinking in earthly terms and there is no marriage in heaven.

Secondly, even the very books that underpin their faith testify to life after death. 'He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive' (v. 38). It is an answer approved by some of the teachers of the law, happy to see Sadducees losing their argument.

Jesus then turns the tables on his inquisitors with a question of his own based upon the scriptures they know well and concerning the

identity of the Messiah, which to the Jews meant 'the Son of David'. Luke does not record any reaction, other than Jesus turning his back on his accusers and turning toward the gathered crowd to denounce the scribes (and Pharisees, according to Matthew 12:38-40) for being like the fig tree that he had previously cursed – promising much and delivering so little of value.

Discussion...

- 5: The gospel narratives show that religious leaders struggled to understand Jesus and what he was saying and doing. Was it that, or had they grown too comfortable in their positions of power and felt threatened?
- 6: The Pharisees and Sadducees seem poles apart, and yet they both worshipped God. Thinking about the variety of churches in your area (not just denominations), how well do you understand their way of 'doing worship' for instance, and would it be helpful to know more?
- 7: The last few verses of this section are about power. Consider for a few moments those who hold the most senior positions in your denomination. How difficult can occupying such a post be, and why?

Looking for signs...

(Read Luke 21:1-38)



Peter Paul Rubens, The tribute money, c1612

We are still in the temple where Jesus was throughout the day, teaching an enthusiastic crowd (v.38) before finding solitude in the evening outside Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives.

At the end of chapter 20, Jesus talks of the teachers of the law taking advantage of widows whilst making lengthy prayers. Now he looks up and contrasts the rich to a widow putting their offerings into the 'temple treasury'. Even though her gift was small, it was far more of a sacrificial offering than that given by the wealthy.

It is not the amount given that is the measure of the offering; but the amount left afterwards.

This leads to a lengthy warning about what is coming and advice about being prepared, known as the 'apocalyptic discourse, also in Mark and Matthew's gospels. The temple was a huge and very solid structure, a symbol of the Jewish religion and glittering with Herodian splendour, so to talk about its destruction was unthinkable. No wonder the disciples want more information.

So, what do we have here, the words of Jesus at a moment in time or a collection of his quotes about this subject, collated by Luke, Mark, and Matthew?

We know Luke as a historian, and it may well be that he had his own accurate summary of Jesus' words in the temple. There are differences in the three gospels, but we could summarise the information shared with the disciples as follows:

1. Do not follow false Messiahs (v.8).
2. Do not get too anxious about what is happening around the world (vv.9-11).
3. If you find yourself in court because of your faith, then God will be there with you (vv.12-15).
4. Even if everyone turns against you, stand firm in your faith (vv.17-19).
5. Get out of Jerusalem before the situation gets critical (vv.20-24).
6. Once the final apocalyptic events start, know that your salvation is close (vv.25-28)
7. When you see the signs, recognise them for what they are, the kingdom of God drawing near (vv.29-31)
8. Whatever happens, the Lord's words endure (vv.32-33)
9. Watch, pray and live a life that is pleasing to God (vv.34-36)

Jesus' use of the word 'generation' in verse 32 could mean the decades after his life (which would include the destruction of Jerusalem), or a more general span of time within which all these things will happen. Mark gives no time limit, and both he and Luke caution against taking anything for granted. Be watchful and prayerful is the key!

Discussion...

- 8: Is our offering to God all about our monetary wealth, or is there more to it than that?
- 9: Jesus is just a short time away from betrayal and arrest and still spending most of his time in the temple teaching. If you try for just a moment to put yourself in his place, what do you think was going through Jesus' mind?
- 10: In verses 25-28 Jesus speaks of various 'signs', in the sky and on the land. How do they speak to you?

For prayer...

Pray for all those who feel a call from God for full or part-time mission work or ministry, that they might be blessed in the offering of their lives in God's service