

20th Sunday after Pentecost

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

People come to Jesus with a trick question, already planning how they'll punish him when he falls prey to their trick question.

It's an old story.

Jesus pulls the rug from under them, and they are met, not with the satisfaction of their play, but with an amazement.

Why do we play such games against each other?

Text

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Comment

In the theatre of this text are characters, setting and plot.

The characters are many: Jesus, the Pharisees, the disciples of the Pharisees, the Herodians. And the secondary characters of God and the Emperor are being invoked.

The setting, too, is curious: Jesus is in Jerusalem. Already — in the scheme of Matthew — he has cast traders from the temple, making way for those in need. The authorities question his authority and he asks them a question about how they measure authority. They can't answer. Jesus tells parables about a son who initially refused to work, but changed his mind, a landlord whose tenants turned violent, a king who invited many to a wedding banquet... Jesus is raising tension, in this most important of cities leading up to this most important of times.

So the characters and the setting are fascinating. Everyone's paying attention, and both the place and the timing are intense.

But the plot? The plot is boring. Dominance. Subjugation. Win Win Win. Beat him. Show that *we* are correct by defeating *him*. There is no surprise in this theatre of humanity.

Somehow, even the characters know their own motivation, even though they don't know they know their own motivation. They think that by kissing ass their hostility will be hidden. Listen:

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think about blah, blah, blah”

There it is, in plain sight, the hostility they have for the other. “And show deference to no one”. They think that by pompous words their true summation of his character – you show deference to no-one – will be hidden. What boring and dangerous traps. No wonder Jesus was on edge.

Interestingly, in this gospel, Jesus *does* show deference. It's just that he's showing deference to the wrong people – well, in the imagination of the powerful anyway.

It's too easy to read this and associate oneself with the Jesus character, or the marginalised characters. *Silly Pharisees*, we might say, *how empty they are in their addiction to superiority*.

But how often do we ask a question where we *know* we know what we want the other to say, in order that they will confirm what we already think of them? Or ask someone “How's your workload going?” when really we want to ask them about why they didn't do the thing that we thought we'd agreed on. Or we might say “Don't you remember what I said last week?” to a family member, when that's not the question at all.

In heightened political times, it is a risky thing to ask a question — a true question — of other people. To ask a true question means we are curious about what the answer will be. Asking a question means saying “There's something I don't know, and I am asking you to help me.” Anything else is manipulation, or scheming, hiding under the guise of a question.

When was the last time — in a political or difficult conversation — you asked a question where you *knew* you *knew* you didn't know the answer?

What might our political lives be like if this kind of questioning was praised, rather than seen as weak?

Jesus of Nazareth was not afraid to say what he thought – we see this here. Trick

questions seem to annoy him. He's an expert at making trick questioners answer their own trick questions. In fact, the questioners are "amazed" at his answer. In Matthew, this word is used seven times ((Matt. 8:10; 8:27; 9:33; 15:31; 21:20; 22:22; 27:14), and always to do with words. But there seems to be something more important here. Jesus is speaking about how the practice of a religion can have a new approach to its own authority, where it is less interested in preservation and more interested in invitation; where it is marked by making space, rather than drawing borders. Borders need guards, and Jesus is critiquing the guarding of borders the imagination behind which is about a violent kind of belonging, rather than a gathering at a feast of sharing.

Response

We know that the readers of Spirituality of Conflict come from across the world. There are about 1000 of us who gather around this text, and when we hear from you (and we're always delighted to hear from you!) we know that you are living in your own culture, political climate, environmental manifestation and religious setting.

What are the places in your life that are devoid of true questions, where questions are used as ploys rather than curiosities?

Consider a true question you could ask this week.

And consider what it might take for you to ask it.

Prayer

Questioning Jesus
You yourself are a question,
a person we can't put a finger on.
Are you a mystery? A man?
A figure of meaning?
A figure of authority, or a questioning of authority?
We come to you with questions
and find you over in the corner talking with
someone we'd ignored.
May we ask the kind of questions
that bring us to curious corners.
Knowing that you often located yourself
in places passed over
by the powerful.
Amen.

Further Reading

AJ Levine's book [Short Stories by Jesus](#) is always worthwhile reading to explore power dynamics. While this book is particularly about parables (and our reading today is not a parable) it does demonstrate the psychology that parables – and today's reading – were addressing, as well as expose some of the ways that the early church blunted the sharpness of some of those amazing short stories by Jesus.

