

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

31.10.2021
By Fiona Bullock

Introduction

Friends, thanks for reading along with Spirituality of Conflict. We are keen to hear from our readers. There are about 1000 people who get this email every week and we have the audacious hope that we could hear from 200 of you. We've got five very simple and short questions for you — it will take you just a minute to do — and it'd really help us as we continue our Spirituality of Conflict planning. [The survey is found by clicking here](#)

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In this passage about the first or greatest commandment, it is understandable to focus on the words Jesus said and how to apply these commandments to our own lives without paying attention to the context in which he was speaking. As we read these verses through the lens of conflict, let's set them back in their full context.

From Mark 11:27 onwards, a plot develops which is intended to overthrow any notion of the authority of Jesus and lead to his arrest. Mark 11:27 – Mark 12:34 describes two ways in which the authorities attempted to exert power over Jesus. When the first strategy of strength in numbers failed, they regrouped to formulate another plan which is later deployed. Firstly, the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders came together to question Jesus' authority and tried to intimidate him with their joint presence. They did not achieve their goal. Instead, he told them a parable, which alluded to the awful treatment that the prophets, judges and kings of Israel had received and the rejection which he, the Son of God, would suffer. Perhaps ironically, they were intimidated by the crowd and so they did not stay to engage in dialogue. Arresting Jesus whilst he was in the middle of a crowd of his supporters was not an option, so they chose to put together a different strategy. This strategy involved sending small groups to test Jesus. In Mark 12:13–17, a trap is set by the Pharisees and Herodians but they are not successful. In Mark 12:18–27, the Sadducees question and attempt to trick him to no avail. Finally, in Mark 12:28–34, a scribe asks Jesus a question.

As you read the passage, I invite you to reflect upon the motivation behind the scribe's question and the way in which he responds to the answer that Jesus gives. Was he playing a part in a strategy created jointly by the authorities? Did he simply want to learn from Jesus? What effect did this dialogue have on Jesus and the scribe?

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## Text

Mark 12:28–34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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## Comment

This text contributes to our understanding of conflict as it is testament to the power of words and respectful dialogue. We need to be aware of how we communicate with others because words can provoke intense reactions. When we truly believe in what we say, we need to reaffirm this with our actions. There is always room for misunderstanding so we should make the effort to understand what the other person is saying and meaning. We should use words to affirm one another and to show grace to one another, even when we disagree. This level of respectful engagement can be transformational, as it promotes the equality of the parties and affirms their right to hold differing beliefs.

**Although words can provoke intense reactions from people, respectful dialogue honours difference.** The chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders did not like the words Jesus offered them in response to their challenging questions. Feeling angry, frustrated and humiliated, they refused to engage with him further and walked away. I realised as I read the passage that I was expecting the encounter with the scribe to follow the same path. I wonder how you read and understood the motivation of the scribe. It is not clear in the text so we definitely bring our own experience to bear in our interpretation of events. Perhaps he was trying to discredit Jesus with an incredibly clever question. ‘What is the first (greatest) commandment?’ There were over 3600 commandments in Israel at that time. It would be the perfect trap to set because one could choose to disagree with any given answer. I favour an alternative understanding. I believe the scribe was genuinely interested in how Jesus might answer and willing to enter into a respectful debate with him. We are told that he had listened to the disputes with others and that he thought that Jesus had answered well. This is what led him to ask the question. Was it a trick? Or was it an honest question that the scribe had felt unable to put into words until he met Jesus? Having listened to Jesus’ generous and gracious answers to the questions of others, I wonder if this might have helped him to voice his own big question.

**Words are powerful but they are most powerful when they are also put into action.** Jesus and the scribe are in agreement that the most important commandment is to love the one true God completely. However, according to Jesus, the second greatest commandment is ‘to love your neighbour as yourself.’ The conversation becomes the embodiment of this. They engage in respectful dialogue, despite any differences they may have had regarding beliefs or practice. Any differences were set aside as they focused on the question at hand and listened to one another. In those moments, they each loved their neighbour. In the preface to the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is asked, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ After telling the parable, he asked the expert in the law to answer his own question. He replied, ‘the one who had mercy.’ The others who had approached Jesus with questions were dismissive of him and when they did not like his response, they brought their encounter with him to an abrupt halt. They showed him no mercy but the scribe did. I wonder what impact the dialogue had upon the scribe and

upon Jesus.

**In order for words to hold their full power, we need to understand, translate and interpret them well.** In the text from Deuteronomy 6:5, there is a beautiful little Hebrew word, *meod*. It is usually used as an adverb meaning 'to excess, abundantly.' The commandment is to love God 'with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your *meod*.' It is commonly translated as power or strength, but this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where it features as a noun. This creates doubt in my mind about the translation of the word, which I believe could be better translated or interpreted to mean that we should love God abundantly with all our hearts, minds and souls: with all that we are. This abundance necessarily leads to the spilling over of that love into loving our neighbours, with whom we may not agree but to whom we should show grace. Again, this is what we see played out in this encounter.

**Words can be used to affirm others.** The scribe repeated the answer Jesus gave and added his opinion that these commandments were indeed more important than rules about sacrifices. Jesus listened to his response and respected his wisdom. Jesus then affirmed him with words that suggest that as people they were not so different in essence. Each party had the opportunity to speak and the opportunity to be heard. They treated one another as equals, showed respect and left the dialogue in a positive manner. Their conversation tears down the barriers of difference and blows apart any preconceived ideas about the other. It is a great example of how to communicate well.

Words are powerful. The experience of listening to another is powerful. The experience of being listened to and being heard can transform individuals and their opinion of themselves. Perhaps it might encourage individuals to love themselves as they love their neighbour. The crowd of onlookers heard the discussion between the scribe and Jesus, equals who treated one another with respect, and no-one dared ask anything else because they were scared that it might cause them to question their own beliefs and practice.

Being willing to ask questions and engage with those who have a different outlook can lead to the growth and development of faith or a change of opinion. This is part of healthy dialogue. In engaging with others, particularly those with whom we believe we are in conflict, it is crucial to keep an open mind. Jesus and the scribe found out that they were in agreement, even though we might expect them to have conflicting views. It is therefore essential to listen to what a person is actually saying rather than what we expect they will say. It is necessary to ensure that we fully understand the words used and their true meaning. I believe such encounters can transform lives. Words are powerful tools so let's use them to love God and our neighbours abundantly.

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## Response

I invite you to take some time to reflect on your responses to these questions:

The authorities took it in turn to ask Jesus a question. If you had the opportunity to ask Jesus one question right now, what would it be?

Have you ever walked away from a conversation or confrontation and wished that you had stayed to engage in dialogue instead? What would have helped you to do this?

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## Prayer

O God who gave us the intellect and awareness to ask questions, about you, about life, about faith, about love, we pray that you will grant us the strength, gentleness and patience to formulate our questions well and to listen with compassion as we seek to better understand those with whom we disagree. May conflict lead to dialogue.

May engagement breed empathy.  
May difference be held with respect.

Amen.

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## Further Reading

### Survey – five short questions (it'll take two minutes)

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### Spirituality of Conflict Book

The book *What Were You Arguing About Along The Way?* is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the brilliant theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning.

It'll be released from Canterbury Press in late November this year, just in time for Advent.

The ISBN is 978-1-78622-399-9

You'll be able to get it from all good bookshops, or online venues.

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