

Mk 11:27-33
Tim Anderson 30/7/23

I went on a cubs camp when I was about 7 years old.
Y'know junior scouts.

I don't remember much about it.

But one incident that has stuck in my memory,
was a kid who had brought a game and watch.

They are museum pieces now –
they've been superseded by xboxs and the like.

But 43 years ago they were the latest thing.

So this kid had brought his donkey kong along.

We were all sharing a dormitory
but he was being really exclusive –
only letting his mates have a go
and telling everyone else they couldn't.

When he was out of the room,
one of the kids who had been denied a turn
took it out of his bag
and started a game.

The owner came back into the room
and challenged angrily,

“Who said you could play with my game and watch?”

Now I'd just been sitting watching,

I hadn't had any part in it.

But something made me say,

“I did.

What are you going to do about it?”

“Who said you could”

It's a question of authority.

And that's the question that Jesus is confronted with in today's reading.

“By what authority are you doing these things?

Who gave you authority to do this?”

The leaders are outraged with Jesus.
They're still smarting from him
driving out the people who were buying and selling in the temple courts.
"This is our temple", they are saying,
"We're in charge around here.
Just who do you think you are
to come in and throw your weight around?
You're a country boy.
You have no official position.
You're a self righteous interferer."
They're really annoyed
and it's the whole lot of them.
The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders.
We read those names and they just roll off the tongue.
But they are actually three separate groups of leaders of the Jewish people.
The priests ran the temple.
The teachers of the law were lawyers in the legal system.
The elders ran the city of Jerusalem as puppets for the Romans.
So Jesus has seriously grumpy people coming at him from all directions.

Presumably the priests were grumpy
because it was their temple he had vandalised;
the teachers of the law were grumpy because he broke the law doing it;
and the elders were grumpy because the commotion he was causing
might raise the ire of their Roman bosses.

So who gave him the authority to do these things?

It's obvious, isn't it?

God did!

If Jesus can tell his mum when he's twelve years old,

"Surely you knew I would be in my Father's house."

Then he knows who's giving him the authority to purify the temple.

But the puzzling thing is,

Jesus doesn't tell them.

Instead he asks them a question in reply
and says he will only answer them if they answer him.

Why is that?

Why won't he tell them who he is?

Here are a couple of wrong answers to the question.

It wasn't because he was trying to pacify them.

You might have thought,

these people are really angry

and they will only get angrier

if Jesus tells them that he's God's Son.

Maybe he doesn't tell them because he doesn't like people being angry
because he wants them to calm down.

Well it's a sort of nice thought.

But it's not true.

If Jesus had been wanting to pacify them,

then he would not have told them the parable that comes next.

It's a parable about some tenants in a vineyard

They beat up the master's servants and kill his Son.

The leaders know that they are the tenants in the parable.

Jesus is winding them up

he's not trying to pacify them.

That's not why he won't answer their question.

You might have thought he didn't answer them

because he was afraid about what they might do to him

if he told them who he was.

But that wasn't true.

For starters he was in Jerusalem because he knew they would crucify him.

He knew that was his Father's plan.

He wasn't scared of them.

So why didn't he answer them?

I wonder if there's something in the question Jesus asked them

that might help us to understand him.

“I will ask you one question.

Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

John’s baptism –

was it from heaven, or of human origin?

Tell me!”

At first blush the question is absolutely unrelated.

What does John’s baptism

have to do with Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple?

It doesn’t seem like much.

But what did John’s baptism signify?

It signified a willingness to accept John’s ministry.

If you allowed John to baptise you,

then by your actions you were saying,

“Yes John, what you are preaching is right.”

And what was John preaching?

He was telling people they needed to repent –

something the Jewish leaders didn’t think they needed to do at all –

and he was telling them

that there was a messiah coming who was greater than he.

John the Baptist said of Jesus,

“This was he of whom I said,

he who comes after me has surpassed me

because he was before me.”

So was John’s baptism from heaven or from men?

The Jewish leaders didn’t accept John’s ministry.

They didn’t join the queues to be baptised.

They thought his baptism was merely a human invention –

something from John’s own imagination –

certainly not something that was mandated by God.

But Jesus had left them with a political problem.

If they said what they really thought,

then they would lose much support among the people.
John had been murdered by the hated Herod not that long before.
To have come out and said,
“John’s baptism wasn’t from God,
it was merely a human invention.”
Well that would have been like jumping up and canning Sinead O'Connor.
People liked her music when she was alive,
but after her death this week,
you can't get up and criticise her.
Even if you had an issue with her,
it's the wrong time.
You would lose all respect.
And it’s the same with John the Baptist.
There were lots of people who had been baptised by him,
people who had recognised him as a prophet sent by God.
If the Jewish leaders wanted those people to respect them,
they couldn’t speak against John.
Jesus had them over a barrel.
He’d caught them in a no win situation.

But we mustn’t think Jesus is just playing clever politics.
He’s thought of a smart way of evading their questioning
He’s got away without having to answer their question.
You might have heard smart alec questions like this one,
“Have you stopped beating your wife yet?”
If you say ‘No,’ then you are still beating the poor woman.
But if you say ‘yes,’ then you’ve admitted that you used to beat her.
It’s a no win question –
but it doesn’t prove anything more than that the questioner is a smart alec.

I mean Jesus has been astute to the politics of the situation –
but there’s an important principle buried here too.
This question shows that the Jewish leaders are rebelling against God.
God sent a prophet to his people –

John the Baptist.

The Jewish leaders were not prepared
to accept the ministry of God's prophet.

Well that's proof their hearts are hardened against God.

If Jesus has proof that their hearts are hardened against God,
he doesn't need to answer their question.

If someone's heart is hardened against God,
then their question isn't genuine.

It's doesn't spring out of a desire to know the answer to the question,
it just springs out of wanting to have some ammunition to accuse Jesus.

Do they really want to know who gave Jesus authority to cleanse the
temple?

No they don't.

Their question is really an accusation.

"You have no authority to do these things!"

There's nothing to be gained by answering their question.

There's no prospect of them saying,

"Oh OK, God gave you authority to cleanse the temple,
that's OK then,

we understand perfectly."

That was never going to happen.

There was no good faith in their questioning –
just hostility.

In this situation, if Jesus had answered their question,
it would have legitimised them.

It would have made it look

like they could place demands on the Son of God

and have him dance to their tune.

Jesus might never have held a position of power

in the way that is understood by the people of this world,

but he didn't dance to someone else's tune.

Even when they lead him away to crucify him, he said to Peter,

Mt 26:53 "Do you think I cannot call on my Father,

and he will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels?”
No one ever dictated terms to Jesus.
Jesus submitted to the will of evil people
when that was the will of the Father.
But no one could make him do anything he didn't think was right.

This story is an interesting insight into Jesus.
If you gave me the rest of the gospels to read
and took away this story
and then told me the start of the story
and got me to try to guess how Jesus would answer the Jewish leaders,
I think I could sit there all year and not guess.
It's a story that shows us the great power of Jesus,
even when he is seemingly in a powerless position.
It's very interesting.
But are there lessons to learn?

I guess on one level we could learn about answering questions.
Not every question needs or deserves an answer.
If a question is asked in bad faith
then it probably only legitimises the questioner to give them an answer.
The problem for us is that we're not Jesus.
Jesus can see right into a person's heart
and he knows whether or not they're asking in good faith.
In our case often we don't know.
I mean sometimes we do know.
When a hoon driver tailgates you
and winds down their window as they overtake you
and shouts,
“Where did you get your licence –
in a wheatbix packet?”
You know that the questioner isn't interested in your answer.
But often someone asks a question,
and if the question is a bit close to the bone,

then you might not be sure if they're having a shot at you or if it's a genuine question.

When someone says to me,

“Do you know that your hair is thinning on top?”

Well they might be letting me know

because I can't see the top of my head.

Or they might be having a bit of a dig.

And because I'm not Jesus –

I can't see into people's hearts –

it's good for me to give people the benefit of the doubt.

Presume they are acting under good motivations

until the evidence makes that view untenable.

I guess that's one way we could apply this passage.

But I think the real reason Mark put this story in his gospel was not so much to tell us about how to live our lives as to tell us something about Jesus.

Jesus knows people's hearts.

The chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders couldn't hide from Jesus' scrutiny.

They approached him to scrutinise him.

They thought they were putting him under the spotlight –

checking whether he had the required level of authorisation for his actions.

But Jesus put them under the spotlight.

And Jesus showed them up as people who were in rebellion against God.

Plenty of people today think they can put God under the spotlight.

They set themselves up in judgement over the creator of the universe.

How many times have you heard comments like these?

“If your God allows terrible things like the war in the Ukraine to happen, I don't want to have anything to do with a God like that.”

“I don't need God.

If God makes you happy that's good for you.

Personally I find I'm pretty happy as I am.”

“If your God believes such and such –
(take whatever part of the Bible’s teaching is currently out of fashion) –
then I don’t want to have anything to do with a God like that.”

“God is just a crutch for weak people.”

“If you’d been hurt like I’ve been hurt,
you wouldn’t ask me to trust in your God.”

When people put the question to God,
this passage shows us that it will come straight back onto them.

No one could argue Jesus into a corner.

And God is the same yesterday today and forever.

People who ask those questions are dealing in bad faith
and they’re playing with fire –
literally.

If you know people like that –
pray for them.

Pray that God might have mercy on them
and bring them to their senses before it’s too late.

Pray for opportunities to talk to them
and the courage to have the conversation.

Hostility towards God doesn’t suddenly become OK
if you were brought up wrongly
or if you’ve had some tragedy in your life.

We must all give an account to the Lord Jesus.
So let us ask him to be merciful.

I wonder too whether this passage might also apply to Christians.

It's clear that some non believers
think that they can put God under scrutiny,
and give their justifications for not submitting to his rule.

But I wonder if we can do it too,
perhaps more subtly.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Lord, I'd love to be able to serve you more whole heartedly at church.

But unfortunately,

You have given me such of lot of family responsibilities,
that I just can't fit it in.

(Conveniently ignoring that there is actually plenty of time
when I'm kicking back not doing family responsibilities either.)

As if having some responsibilities elsewhere
gives me a free pass to ignore the needs in God's church which is his body.
or this one ...

Lord, I would be more humble and gentle when I talk with my children,
but for some reason you've given me feisty kids.

As if it's God's fault that our kids are like us!

And as if it's an excuse not to do what God tells us to do,
just because it's a little bit hard.

or this one

Lord, I know I ought to pray to you more,

but you didn't give me what I wanted when I prayed to you ten years ago.

As if we get to tell God how he answers our prayers.

Let's not think we can scrutinise God.

Our lives are measured by him.

We don't get to tell him if he measures up.

He's our creator.

The creature doesn't get to talk back.