

Exam Time for Jesus Pentecost 24 – 7th November 2010

Readings:

Luke 20: 27-38

God of mystery and life, we come before you this morning with many questions. Questions about living, questions about dying. Questions that are shouted in anger and questions we hardly dare utter. But for the present, we acknowledge that we see through a glass darkly. Help us to be patient in our asking, and courageous in our listening and help us to accept the mystery that is you. AMEN.

Do any of you like exams? Who's even had one in the last year? For some of us it's been a long time. Perhaps we can't even remember that feeling we used to get each November. It's exam time now and thousands of year 12 students not just in Tassie but around Australia are preparing for exams. And right at this moment they're probably wishing it wasn't. And I don't like exams one bit! I remember in Sydney as I used to cross City Road next to Sydney University in November, that I actually prayed that a car would knock me down, damaging only my right hand so I couldn't write. And also praying that it didn't hurt too much in the process. But alas, as I have had cause to observe many times since, God does not work like that. God does not work like that at all. But there is hope for all of us, as I started my Theology degree in my forties I left my suicidal dreams behind and would sing to myself "Do not be afraid I am with you."

And I also learned as I grew older that exams are part of everyday life - even after you leave school you get tested. Every Sunday morning, I feel I sit an exam. My sermon - it's graded every Sunday morning. Or at least I hope it is - because if it is not I must be boring you, and God's word should never be boring. I'd hope you'd have questions after each of the sermons you hear. Questions of clarification, questions indicating disagreement, questions about life that perhaps can never be answered. And in a way every time we find ourselves in a new situation with new people, we are being examined, being assessed. That's the nature of human beings.

So it should come as no surprise to us that Jesus, sharing our humanity, was also given examinations. Indeed the gospels show that Jesus' life seemed to be one long examination, with people coming to him all the time seeking him to answer their questions. "What must I do to be saved?" asks the rich young ruler, seriously struggling for God's truth in his affluent life. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" asks Nicodemus, genuinely puzzled by Jesus' words.

And "How is it that you a Jew asks a drink of me a woman of Samaria?" asks the woman at the well, genuinely amazed by Jesus' behaviour. And Jesus answers all their questions, but because each questions relates to ultimate mystery, his answers often provoke further questions. Matters of spirituality, of God's grace, of the kingdom of God can only be experienced, can only be lived.

Even Jesus' disciples found it hard to understand. Their questions indicated that they missed the point. But Jesus uses these opportunities to answer their honest questions with patience. Questions like, "Who has sinned - this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Or "Who is the greatest among us?" But these are honest questions and whilst perhaps being the wrong questions, they are genuine attempts to understand the way of Jesus.

Questions from the disciples and those genuinely seeking Jesus are the kind that we need to be asking if we are to know how God would have us live. If we have no questions about our faith, or if we live in a church climate that has all the answers and are too scared to ask questions, then how can we grow in faith. There are questions we need to ask when unaccountable things happen in our lives, and serious life questions never have simple black and white answers. That's why Jesus seldom had straight-forward answers, why he loved to answer a question with another question. Things of the Spirit are always by definition a mystery.

But we like answers and are suspicious of difficult questions. And that's why fundamentalism is so attractive.

And in Jesus' day you could have your choice of fundamentalists. You had the Pharisees whose fundamentalism lay in their reading of the Scriptures. So the Pharisees seek to trap Jesus in matters of law. For them living a spirit-filled life was simply a matter of following the instruction book. It could answer all your questions, thousands of little laws contained in the Talmud, and they knew them backwards. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" they ask. "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And they are incapable of hearing Jesus' answers because they already have their own answers. In **their** sort of religion there is no need for mystery and it leaves you deaf and blind to God's love for all. It results in a surface, legalistic approach to any relationship with our Creator. And Jesus was having none of it. At times I wonder if some forms of today's Christianity are in danger of behaving as if they have all the answers, and have become deaf and blind to God's yearning inclusive love.

Then there were the Sadducees, fundamentalists of a different ilk. These are the professional clergy of their days - the temple officials, the chief priests and scribes, heavy theologians who could argue up a real storm and leave you feeling in awe of their knowledge of all things to do with God. Powerful, self righteous and self-serving men who ran religion in Jerusalem. So it comes as no surprise that Jesus, the servant leader, Jesus the mystic would come into conflict with a group who told their co-religionist what to believe.

So when Jesus upends the tables in the their temple, they begin to ask questions. "Just who does he think he is? How can we put this peasant in his place?" It says in Luke 20:20 "So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest in order to trap him...." They decided to give Jesus their own exam.

The whole of chapter 20 of Luke is set aside for this examination. It starts with a question on authority, something about which the Sadducees were expert. "Show us your credentials" they ask, as if a relationship with God can be learned from books. Jesus refuses to answer and so fails the first question.

Next a question about Church and State, one that continues to be very relevant. "Who do we serve, God or Caesar?" Clever people Sadducees, they know that if Jesus comes down on either side they've got him. Either treason or blasphemy. Jesus' answer - Render to Caesar what is Caesar and to God the things that belong to God. Not an answer that the examiners expected or appreciated.

So on to the third question, today's gospel reading - the Sadducees' favourite subject, one that they loved to tease the Pharisees with - about the resurrection of the body - in which they don't believe, but that doesn't stop them. And so this ludicrous hypothetical about a woman who carelessly goes through seven husbands! Who will be her husband in the afterlife (which of course they do not believe in). You can almost see the smirk on their faces. They try to make fun of Jesus, but Jesus will not play their game, uses the Scriptures to prove them wrong and then points to the absurdity of their question - trying to understand the age to come in terms of our current age.

And you know what, we still do the same. Often wasting endless hours in speculation and argument about the life to come. As if it matters.

The kingdom of God is now, Jesus shouts. Heaven can be here and hell can be here, it all depends on how we behave here and now. And for us - it is Jesus the Christ that points to an authentic way of living.

Yet sometimes we are like the Sadducees asking each other silly unanswerable questions and worse still using our answers to divide our communities. And like the Sadducees, like the Pharisees, sometimes even like the disciples we ask the wrong questions, like: "What's heaven like?" Like "Who do we follow, earthly rulers or God?" or "Who's the most important in our church?", and "who is truly in and who is out as far as God is concerned." All of these are the wrong questions to ask.

If we are truly interested in following Jesus then we need to become like the woman at the well, like Nicodemus, like the rich young ruler and ask, "what must I do to be saved, to be made whole?".

We are asked to become like little children, to ask the questions children ask. To trust and have faith as little children. Not in our knowledge, not in our theories, but opening ourself to God so that God can teach us his way to live.

Let us ask the questions that bring us to God.

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