**Sermon: Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 31st Oct 2021**

**Ruth 1.1-18. Ps 146 Hebrews 9:11-15, Mark 12:13-17, 28-34**

I love stories or movies with plot twists, the kind that keep you hanging on and have to keep reading or watching in order to discover how it will unfold and end.

In our Gospel reading today, Mark records two stories that we will see in time how the two are connected. Mark provides us with the set up. The Chief Priests have sent some Pharisees and Herodians to trap Jesus by his words. They appear to be cunning and sly. ‘Teacher we now that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with truth’ (Mark 12: 14). Can you hear the subtle way the Pharisees are addressing Jesus? Using smooth words to attempt to draw Jesus in to their discussion.

Their question however, that comes directly after verse 14 belies their intent to catch Jesus out with his words. ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? She we pay them or not’. Now to you or I this question may seem a little odd. You and I know that taxes are to be paid to the governing authorities. What Mark is revealing here is the way the Religious hierarchy controlled the flow of money into the Temple treasury. When people came to the festivals, and needed to buy a lamb or a dove for the sacrifice, the money changers at the temple would exchange their money or currency into the one the Temple used. Not only were the money changes and the religious elite profiting from the sale of animals for sacrifice, they also exacted a Temple Tax. In Matthew chapter 17:24, Peter is asked if Jesus paid the Temple Tax. So the Pharisees are attempting to draw Jesus into a discussion around the payment of taxes. Jesus response to them tells us a lot of what Jesus thought of the religious hierarchy and the Pharisees. IN verse 15b, Jesus knowing their hypocrisy asks them, ‘Why are you putting me to the test? A frank and honest assessment of what is happening to that point. The Pharisees are indeed putting Jesus to a test.

Jesus then asks them to bring a denarius. One denarius was equal to a day’s pay for a labourer at the time. A denarius was stamped with the head of the Emperor. And so, when Jesus asks them whose head is on the coin, they answer, ‘The emperors’. Jesus then tells them to give to Emperor what is his and to God the things that are Gods.

Now our Gospel reading today skip from verse 17 to verse 28 and for good reason. Out of the preceding discussions, one of the scribes approach Jesus a question regarding the commandments and which is the most important or first of all. Now to us this might also be an odd thing to do. It is plain to us and in some ways it ought to have been a straightforward point even for the Scribe to understand. So what is going on here.

Debates about Torah, or those books that make up the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, and which contain the law of Moses, were common place. What the scribe is doing is making a fairly typical request that would have been a part of Synagogue attendance on the Sabbath. Jesus replies by quoting form Torah, or Deuteronomy 6:4-5, traditionally known as the *Shema,* the traditional daily prayer. We say the Shema as part of our service, Love God, love your neighbour as yourself. On this point the Scribe and Jesus agree!

Which leads me to ask, is it possible that the neither Jesus or the Scribe, a legal expert, could imagine one kind of love without the other? In Luke’s gospel parallel, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan’ in order to give more specific meaning to the term ‘neighbour’.

Part of the shock in this story in Mark is that there is agreement. We have already noted how the Pharisees and scribes were attempting to catch Jesus out by asking a question about taxes. So what is going on here? Throughout Mark’s gospel, the scribes were constantly evaluating Jesus’ activities. From wanting to charge Jesus with blasphemy or making comment about the company Jesus kept or even claiming Jesus was Beelzebul because he cast out demons. At the cross, they are the one who mock Jesus, saying he saved others; he cannot save himself (Mk 15:31).

But this particular scribe engages in conversation with Jesus even suggesting that this kind of love was ‘more important than… sacrifices’, which could be understood as a critique of Temple practices. This is not what I want to draw your attention to.

So what is Mark trying to do here? What are we to understand from this discussion between a Scribe and Jesus? While the first group of Pharisees clearly want to trap Jesus, this Scribe is seeking understanding, seeking knowledge. And it seems he finds it. Jesus agrees and says to the Scribe, ‘You are not far from the Kingdom of God’.

What then can we learn from these two very different conversations? That sometimes it is better not to engage with people who try to catch us out. Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites for good reason. Secondly that we are to remain open to the other, open minded and open hearted to listen, to those of our own tradition and others. There are many who are ‘not far from the kingdom of God’. Mark shares these stories to invite us, not only to be lovers of God and of our neighbour’s. We are to go the extra mile, like the good Samaritan, being open to hear, to listen and to engage with others who may think differently from you or I. Our love of neighbour can extend to respecting the belief systems of others, which, in turn, represents our love of God and our love of those around us. Jesus showed his love toward the Scribe by listening to him and engaging in dialogue that created understanding. I think that is a wonderful example for us to show the self-same respect and regard for others around us. Let us pray, in the name of God….