

Sermon - Primary relationship

Based on Matthew 22.15-33 (NRSV)

Eternal life

- Now that we have finished working through Paul's letter to the Philippians, we return to focusing on the Gospel passages from Matthew's account.
- But it's appropriate that we bring insights from Paul's writings to our engagement with other Scriptures.
- A particular insight from Paul was his comparison of the value of regulations with the value of relationship.
- He was addressing the concern from Jewish followers of Jesus that they thought it necessary for Gentile followers of Jesus to comply with the Jewish regulation of circumcision.
- And Paul pointed out that even though he was even more entitled as a Jew than they were, in terms of complying with regulations - the Law - that this entitlement was worthless, because it was the relationship with God through Jesus that made one right-wise with God.
- And this fundamental teaching by Paul was backed up by Jesus' own words: *'This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ.'* (John 17.3)

Social capital

- And this notion of it all coming down to relationship was affirmed for me yesterday, when some parishioners and I attended the first of a series of Zoomed seminars by the local Maroondah Interfaith Network, focused on Building Community.
- We were introduced to the idea of social capital, which works similarly to financial capital.
- Financial capital is about people pooling money together, such as is done through banks, which then enables bigger projects to be funded than if one person tried to fund a project by themselves.
- Social capital refers to 'the capacity of a group or network to accomplish things that individuals can't do on their own.'
- And so the more connected a community is, the better that community is able to help its own members and other communities.
- The connections are literally relationships:
 - the relationships of close **bonds** with families and friends;
 - the **bridging** relationships that are with people in different groups, such as work colleagues, or other parishioners;
 - and the **linkages** which are our connections with institutions and agencies.

The community of the Trinity

- As a priest I am reminded of the divine community of relationships that we refer to as the Trinity - the intimate relationships between the three persons of God: Father, Son and Spirit.
- And that God invites us into that divine community, connecting us in through relationship.
- For me, this is what I understand faith to essentially be: acknowledging that relationship, trusting in that relationship, and knowing that it works best when it goes both ways - when it's reciprocal.
- And this is what I understand Jesus' ministry and teaching to be fundamentally about - our faith relationship with God.
- Once that is clearly in place, we are then able to align our other relationships rightly by it.

How the Pharisees 'relate' to Jesus

- And it is with this lens - this way of viewing things - that I come to see what Jesus is on about in today's Gospel passage.

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- The reading describes different groups of people - Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees - intentionally out to get Jesus, trying to trap him by saying something against himself, or against God.
- Normally one would engage in debate with a rabbi, a teacher, in order to explore and learn.
- They know Jesus is a teacher and they call him this.
- But they are hypocritical in pretending to show respect for him, because they are not out to learn from him, or even to learn with him.
- Their focus is to discredit him in order to get rid of him.
- How ironic when someone brings God's truth to them, that they are focused on unwittingly opposing God by trying to bring him down.
- What does this say about their relationship with Jesus? That they aren't interested in having a relationship with him.
- What does this say about their relationship with God? That it is so dysfunctional from their side that they cannot even recognise the Spirit of God speaking through Jesus.

The lose-lose riddle

- And then when we look at the riddles they try to trap Jesus with, these are basically riddles about relationship.
- In the first riddle, listen to the blatant hypocrisy of their words as they speak so nicely to Jesus:
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. (Matt 22.16)
- It is well known that niceness can be used to hide a poisonous tongue, and to hide the means to hurt and wound.
- They call Jesus sincere when they aren't; they say Jesus teaches in accordance with truth when they don't; they praise him for showing deference to no one - that is, not to judge anyone as more worthy than another - when they would show partiality.
- Jesus rightly discerns these people who are supposed to be teachers of the way of God as being hypocrites, and calls them that.
- They have tried to trap him with pitting obedience to the Roman emperor against obedience to God.
- If Jesus said that one should pay taxes to the emperor, who had set himself up as the gods' son, then they could accuse him of supporting someone in opposition to God.
- If Jesus said that one should not pay taxes to the emperor for that reason, then they could accuse him of being a traitor of the state.

Jesus plays a deeper game

- And instead of playing their game, Jesus goes to the heart of the matter, and addresses the fundamental flaw: relationship.
- When he says '*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*' (Matt 22.21), Jesus is telling them to get their relationships sorted out:
 - their relationship with the emperor - with regard to how they might think and respond to the emperor and the emperor's leadership of the empire;
 - and their relationship with God - with regard to how they might think and respond to God and God's leadership of their own hearts and minds.
- This riddle put to Jesus is the same one Christians face even today:
 - the dilemma of trying to balance the allegiances and demands made on us by our secular laws and secular society - to balance these against how Jesus calls us to treat and value others, especially the others that our society discounts or denigrates.

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First love God ...

- However, if we remember the words of Jesus, that we should “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*” (Matt 22.37) as the first and greatest commandment, then it means that this is ideally our primary relationship.
- As I said earlier, Jesus’ ministry and teaching is fundamentally about our faith relationship with God.
- So when Jesus says ‘*Give ... to God the things that are God’s*’ (Matt 22.21), we can understand by this that we need to ensure that this is our primary relationship, and that our side of it is in order and functional - that we are actively connected with God, and in conversation with God through worship and prayer, and intentionally listening to God’s Word.

... and then we love others

- Once this primary relationship is clearly in place, we are then able to align our other relationships rightly by it.
- And this includes all the different relationships that I described at the beginning when I described the idea of social capital: the bonds with friends and family, the bridges that we have with others in the different groups and organisations that we are part of, and also the linkages that we have with agencies and institutions.
- All these different relationships - we can orient them to best effect by aligning them with our relationship with God.
- By giving to God the things in our lives that are God’s, we can then more easily discern what belongs to the emperor - metaphorically speaking - and what does not belong to the emperor.

If our orientation isn’t Godward?

- It occurs to me here that when we don’t make our faith relationship with God our primary relationship to orientate our other relationships by, then what are we orientating our other relationships with?
- Ourselves - how we each might relate to self?
- Or according to the relationship that does take the prime position in our lives?
- Or perhaps our relationships aren’t orientated at all, and when they run at cross purposes, we hope that they don’t bump into each other.

God of the living

- The other story that this time the Sadducees try to trap Jesus with is the fanciful one of a woman having seven brothers as husbands in turn, and being widowed seven times before dying herself.
- And the Sadducees have set this up to show how ridiculous the notion of the resurrection is, in that the woman could not possibly have seven marital relationships in existence simultaneously in the resurrection life.
- And again Jesus points to God as not only the God of relationship, but the one with whom we should have our primary relationship: ‘*He is God not of the dead, but of the living.*’ (Matt 22.32)
- There are other perspectives on the point that Jesus makes here, but today this is my focus: that once we have our primary relationship with God - with the *living* God - sorted out, then how our other relationships might function will fall into place, even the relationship we might have with a spouse or partner.

The social capital of being connected with God

- Near the beginning of this sermon I talked about social capital: the more connections there are in a community, the healthier it is, and the more that people are connected with those that are different from them - different in a wide variety of ways - the greater the social capital.

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- And for the followers of Jesus, we need to learn this same concept from him: the social capital of our connectedness with the divine, when we acknowledge and receive the love that God the Father has with us through his Son Jesus Christ, and respond by loving God in return, in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- And then make the same kinds of connections with others, loving them with God's love, in the way that God does.
- And the more that we do this as individuals, and that we do this as a faith community, the more blessed we will be, and the more blessed others will be through us.