

A sermon preached by the Very Reverend Andrew McGowan
St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
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Although a physical newspaper has its pleasures, there are advantages to the comprehensiveness of a web version, with the display of all those headlines to choose from. Yesterday I was struck by the number of questions on the front page of the *New York Times* suggesting what we want to know about our world:

Will Congress Ever Limit the Forever-Expanding 9/11 War?

Should Your Spouse Be Your Best Friend?

What Are We Doing in Niger?

Who Deserves a Ticker-Tape Parade?

Limit on 401(k) savings?

Could you be living in an illegal apartment?

Just how bad is the Opioid epidemic?

These range from the personal and domestic to the global and political. All of them could concern any of us; some of them concern all of us. So much of what we are concerned with comes in the form of questions.

Today's Gospel story is also about questions. It takes place on a fateful day, according to Matthew's narrative of Jesus. This is Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem, a few days before Passover. The previous day he had entered the city in triumph, then arrived at the Temple Mount and thrown out the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals. This next day, he has returned and engaged with the people, and with his opponents among their leaders, in terms which we have been hearing over the last few Sundays - parables of judgement and grace, and now a series of questions of a pointed nature.

There are actually three questions Jesus is asked by his opponents; the first was last week's Gospel, a question from the Pharisees and Herodians about the tribute to Caesar; we heard at the beginning of today's Gospel that the Sadducees had also been silenced by Jesus, but the lectionary also silenced them and skipped their question about the resurrection; so today we have the last of the three. This question from some of the Pharisees is "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

The answer to this you know well, I think - it even appears in the Prayer Book, in the Penitential Order and in the Holy Eucharist Rite One. The answer - that we are to love God with all our being, and our neighbor as ourselves - is clear, but not easy. In fact it is more like a different question, because surely we have to ask how to do that (consider how in Luke's similar story Jesus' conversation partner asks "who is my neighbor?").

I do not think there is any place in the Gospels where Jesus merely answers a question neatly so as to satisfy the hearer and allow them to go away with a neat package of how-tos to make life better or easier or more fulfilling. Rather he always turns the question back somehow to the starting place of the questioner, probing them in unexpected and perhaps unwelcome ways. This, rather than through easy answers, is his response to our questions.

Now however Jesus himself asks a question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

Now call me daring, but I am going to suggest that few of you have lain awake at night worrying about this one. Ps 110, from which Jesus quotes, evokes the coronation of ancient Israelite kings - in its words an ancient choir sings in praise, likening the appointment of a king to God putting the new monarch at God's own right hand. But by Jesus' time, this Psalm is being read as though King David wrote it, and also as referring to a messianic, future king. How can this Messiah be both David's son and David's Lord, an inferior and a superior?

The questioners are rendered silent, and we are told that from then on no-one dared ask him any questions. This is actually ominous - the questions are over, and the decisions have been made by his enemies. We know how the story goes from here; Jesus in fact becomes the victim of a false certainty that thinks all the questions have been answered. This is, I suggest, only possible in death; to do so before death is fatal. The moment the questions stop is the end.

There actually is an answer to Jesus' question, and it is in front of them. This isn't really about the niceties of biblical interpretation, it's about Jesus himself. Jesus - to recall a cliché - Jesus is the answer. A descendant of David can be David's Lord, because this one will be not just another king but savior of the world.

Christians do say that Jesus is the answer. Some of you will remember bumper stickers or billboards with this written in bold letters. An apocryphal story suggests at least one of these billboards was once spray-painted with "what's the question?" The real meaning of Jesus as answer, and the reality and authenticity of our discipleship, depends on what it is we take the question to be.

Saying "Jesus" is the answer to questions of self-interest and exclusion, just adding a layer of religiosity to our cocoons, isn't really about Jesus at all. Making Jesus an imaginary friend who suits our needs but has nothing to say about those of our neighbors is not Jesus at all. What Jesus calls us to is not glib answers, but good questions, sometimes hard questions; questions about our own lives, questions about the world, questions about meaning and love, and justice. Certainly God has answers, but for now it's the questions that lead us forward, and for now the only answers worth having will be those that help us discern the next question.

Today is your Commitment Sunday, and very many of you are giving an answer to an important question about this place, this community, and yourselves as you offer your pledge. You're responding to the God who seeks our love, and our love of neighbor; but I hope your pledge has on it, along with the visible writing of your commitment, one or more invisible questions - how can I love God more fully? who is my neighbor? And, what next, Jesus?