

Mark 12.38-44

Jesus is... the puncturer of pride

Amington

Sunday 24 February 2019

Mark: Seeing Jesus (39)

The heart of the problem

A wife called to her family – ‘dinner’s ready!’ As they emerged from their different rooms, the daughter heard her father grumbling to himself again about his wife’s ‘boring’ food.

They all sat down in the kitchen, and as usual the father closed his eyes and said grace, ‘Thank you Lord for this delicious meal prepared by my lovely wife. Amen.’ His daughter looked at him thoughtfully.

During the meal, she asked him, ‘Daddy, does God hear us when we pray?’ With his most pious face on, he replied, ‘Yes darling, he hears us *every* time we pray.’

A little while later she asked, ‘Daddy, does God *only* hear us when we pray?’

Swelling with pride that his prayerfulness had encouraged his daughter to think about spiritual matters, the father replied, 'Actually darling, God hears us *all* the time.'

'Then which does he believe?'

In our reading today, Jesus is still in the temple, teaching the crowd, debating with the scribes and teachers of the law – as he has been for the past five weeks of our Mark series.

The difference today is that, instead of debating some theology, Jesus turns his attention to behaviour – and Mark puts these two events next to each other to highlight a key part of Jesus' teaching.

Time and again Jesus taught that what matters is the heart – and if there's a problem with the heart. God looks beyond our actions and our behaviour, to what's inside, to our hearts.

It's a bit like trying to bake a cake with rotten eggs – it doesn't matter how sweet the icing is, how beautiful it looks – it's still inedible and bitter.

Being 'wholehearted' isn't enough – we can be wholeheartedly wrong, or wholeheartedly selfish. We need God to perform heart surgery, to begin taking away the selfishness, the bitterness and the anger and the hurt, replacing them with love and peace.

A heart of pride

Jesus turns his attention to the teachers of the law (38):

‘Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect.’

Mark 12.38 (NIV)

I guess, in a sense, who *doesn't* like to be greeted with respect?! It's much nicer if people see me walking in the street, smile and say, 'Hello' – instead of yelling some insult across the road, or totally ignoring me.

Jesus wasn't talking about that, though – he was talking about how the teachers of the law dressed up in their expensive robes, a symbol of wealth and high status, and deliberately walked around, so that people would greet them with deference.

They were wholehearted: but wholeheartedly proud.

And it gets worse (39). Where they sat in the synagogue was more important to them than worshipping God. Having the place of honour at a celebration feast was more important to them than the thing they were celebrating. They filled the air with long prayers (40), more interested in showing off than actually praying to God.

They were wholehearted: but wholeheartedly proud.

Now, I hope none of us is quite as self-centred as that. And yet, that pride, that concern for appearances is perhaps something most of us can recognise in ourselves. We want other people to think the best of us – so we act as though our thoughts are *more* holy, that we pray *more* diligently, that we read the Bible *more* carefully, than is actually the case. If we are a cake, we make the icing look as wonderful as possible, to hide the rotten eggs inside.

Now, I know that many people find it hard to share with a church leader, vicars like me, their struggles with faith and life as a Christian. Well, let me tell you two things.

First, I know that what I see on the outside isn't the whole truth, about any of you – why? Because that's also true for me. I have all sorts of struggles, with discipline, prayer, depression and anxiety (to name but four), that most of you never see.

That means, if you come to me, you will be greeted with neither surprise nor condemnation, but love, compassion, and prayer – and of course confidentiality. My job is not to run an organisation, but to help all of us grow and mature together as Christians. That's literally what I'm here for!

Second, it's really important that we find a group of Christian friends with whom we can be honest about how we are doing, so they can encourage and challenge us, and help us grow in our faith.

One of the best ways to do that is by joining a home group. We have several which meet throughout the week, to chat and pray and study the Bible together. If you'd like to join one, please speak to me, or to the group leader – and if you'd like to join one on a different day, please tell me, because you never know there might be others who want to meet then too!

Please don't be too proud to admit weakness, or ask for help.

Trying to go it alone as a Christian is never going to end well. We need one another's help and support to keep going on the journey – and for that we need to open ourselves up, to pull down those barriers of pride, to stop worrying so much about what people think of us, and learn to trust that they might love us anyway, warts and all – because they're no difference, and because that is how God first loves us.

A heart of generosity

In a remote village in Central America the word got out among the peoples of the region that one of the missionaries that had served the country for many years was about to return home to live out her retirement.

The people decided to honour her for her years of service with a public ceremony of thanks. News of the event spread far and wide, to all the places touched by her ministry.

One very old and very poor man walked for four days over the mountains to bring his gift to the missionary. It was two coconuts, but it was all the man had.

The missionary recognised the man as coming from the remote village in the mountains. ‘Brother,’ she said, ‘I can’t believe you would walk so far to present me with this gift.’

He replied, ‘The long walk is part of the gift.’

How different the poor widow was to the teachers of the law! Where their hearts were full of self-centredness and pride, hers was full of generosity and trust.

Mark tells us,

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.

Mark 12.41 (NIV)

In Jesus' day the temple in Jerusalem had various courtyards. First was the outer court, the court of the Gentiles – anyone could go there. Then was the court of the women – no Gentiles allowed. Then was the court of Israel – where men could observe the work of the priests – no women allowed. Finally was the court of priests – only priests allowed.

The temple treasury was inside the court of women. There were eleven trumpet-shaped receptacles for people's offerings, and two for the temple tax – and you could hear the contributions being dropped, or poured in.

Can you imagine having that today?? If, one by one, you had to come forward and put your contributions into a box, for everyone else to see *and hear* how much you were putting in?

And can you imagine the sniggers of the crowd as the widow came forward (42) and put in her two coins? *Drop two coins onto a plate.*

The word Mark uses is *lepta*, the smallest and least valuable coin of the day. It was in fact such a small and worthless coin that Mark had to explain what it was to his readers – whom most people think were in the richer West of the Roman empire, where the *lepta* wasn't even used.

Her gift was almost literally worthless – the sort of gift where it's not even worth the time it takes to count the coins.

And yet Jesus said (43), **'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.'**

We might think, come on Jesus, of course she hasn't – unless *worth* can't be measured with coins. What if, instead of pounds, shillings and pence, Jesus values the human heart?

'They all gave out of their wealth,' Jesus said (44), **'But she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.'** Their gifts may have been large, but they weren't costly, because they had so much. Like the long flowing robes and long-winded prayers of the teachers of the law, their large gifts were for show, to receive the admiration of the crowd.

But the poor widow's gift was costly, and therefore truly generous. She received no admiration – except from Jesus, who looks within, and sees the heart. That is why Jesus could say (43), **'this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.'**

She was wholehearted: wholeheartedly generous.

Dream small

I said earlier that I hope none of us is as self-centred and proud as the teachers of the law – and I doubt any of us is as generous as the poor widow Jesus observed. We are all probably somewhere in between the two: torn between our selfish and self-centred hearts and desires, and the generosity Jesus commends.

- 1) That's normal – we are all on a journey with God.
- 2) God loves us anyway – he doesn't expect perfection
- 3) But nor does he want us to stay the same – he wants us to grow, in holiness, love and generosity

I said earlier that we need heart surgery – well, God is the surgeon. He promises in the Bible to take hearts of stone and turn them to hearts of flesh. What's incredible to me is that God, the creator of all, is interested in *my* heart, in yours. God holds the universe in the palm of his hand, yet is concerned about *my* heart, and yours.

How can this be? I'm so small, so insignificant.

It's no secret that the Church of England is struggling at the moment, with declining numbers and declining finances. We aren't dead yet – but it's tempting to look for the big ideas, the big projects, to reverse the decline: big projects make a big difference.

And I confess that I've succumbed to that attitude recently. I have been talking to the Borough Council about whether or not there is an opportunity to build a new church community centre on the Kerria estate.

Amington is an unusual community – let's be honest, it isn't really a functioning community at all – which makes our mission a challenge, and I thought that if there's a way of doing a big project, it might galvanise Amington, revitalise and bring people together – in other words, it might put the heart back into our parish.

And then Tuesday happened.

On Tuesday morning as I was praying God told me that a building might be the geographical heart of a community – but what's more important is that *we* – the church family in Amington – are the heart of Amington, for a church isn't a building it's people.

Then I read this in Matthew 5:

[Jesus said,] ‘You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.’

Matthew 5.14 (NIV)

I realised that in my thinking I was getting it the wrong way round. That verse isn’t about having a building in a visible place, on a hill, in the middle of a parish – for example, Amington – *it’s about God’s people being the light of the world, a light that can’t be hidden.*

Then later that morning as I was preparing for this sermon I read through the passage from Mark for today, I thought about that poor widow and her meagre offering, and I felt God say, ‘Size doesn’t matter’ – what matters is our *faith* in *him*.

Finally – sometimes when I’m not listening God has to speak to me rather loudly and repeatedly, but after this I got the message – finally, that afternoon Mandy sent me a message about a song that she thought I’d like – here it is.

Play Dream Small by Josh Wilson.

God spoke to me in those four ways on Tuesday – and made me listen. As Jesus taught when he was observing people in the temple courts, what matters is neither outward appearance nor size, but the heart. Do we have hearts of love, faith and generosity, or hearts of self-centredness and pride?

What matters is that we follow Jesus together and wholeheartedly. The time for big dreams may come – I still believe there is the need for something like that church centre – but to make an ocean God starts with rivers.

So let's dream small, let's ask God to transform our hearts, let's ask Jesus to use us wherever we are, so we can each make a small difference, and trust in God to take those small things and make them grow.