

## 5 Who He Is

The twelve disciples whom Jesus had singled out spent a lot of time with him, getting to know him and his teaching. That teaching had a way of being simple and straightforward while it nonetheless challenged people to listen and think again. When he spoke to large crowds, he often spoke in parables<sup>1</sup>, little stories and illustrations that struck and made a point. But for those who wanted to understand, they left room to reflect and to ask whether there was more to be seen. They were very memorable little vignettes, but if you wanted to know what they pointed to you had to think a bit more and hear a bit more. Most of the crowd didn't do this, and Jesus did not expect them to. They were enthusiastic, and he loved them, but mostly they did not take in what he was telling them. Many of them, attracted by the splash and wonder of it all, would not really listen, and some, he had already found, were there with hostile intent. It was only to those he kept with him as he went from place to place, that he looked for deeper understanding.

Jesus was telling people what the kingdom of God was like and how it came about. For it wasn't a sudden irruption of force, God asserting himself to crush the opposition. It grew like seed, and if in places it seemed to fail, to die after a false start, in other places it took root and flourished like a good crop. It wasn't a major political event, happening all at once with everyone seeing and recognising it. It grows like a crop grows. Even the farmer who sows it doesn't know how, but it certainly grows and when it has grown the farmer has no difficulty recognising and harvesting it. The kingdom of God is real – a harvest that really comes, but it is real too in the quiet process of growth where God's power is already at work. And if its beginning is very small, like a tiny mustard seed, it will grow to be a very big bush in the end.

The disciples who travelled with him heard all his teaching, and some of it several times, but they learned too, and perhaps most of all, from seeing and knowing Jesus himself, the things he did and the person he was, as much as what he said about the kingdom. He was a very ordinary person, which was surprising, and he was a very extraordinary person, which could be alarming.

Once, they were crossing over the lake, the "Sea" of Galilee, when they were caught in one of its sudden storms.<sup>2</sup> The boat was tossed about dangerously and taking in water, but Jesus, exhausted by his work with the crowds, was asleep in the stern. He slept like a baby – and better than a baby. Even the noise of the storm didn't seem to disturb him. They had to wake him up.

"Don't you care, Master? We're going to sink!"

He woke up, stood up and spoke to the storm: "Be quiet. Calm down." The wind dropped and the sea became calm. But Jesus has as much need to rebuke his disciples.

"How could you be so frightened? Don't you have any faith?"

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 4: 33 – 34 <sup>2</sup> Mark 4: 35 ff

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They looked at him, filled with awe. The authority in him that had struck the people in Galilee was wider and more awesome still. The disciples realised that they didn't know him.

“Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him.”

This is a focal question in Mark's gospel. Who can he be? Who is Jesus? Where you thought you knew him as Jesus, the builder's son from Nazareth, or as an itinerant preacher and teacher, or even as some kind of prophet – you were still challenged by the next event. Is that the whole story? Seeing what he does and hearing what he says, can you really sum him up so easily?

Who can this man be who stands up in a tossing boat and calms the forces of nature? What is his power and what could be its limits? If he can stop a storm in its wildest pandemonium what might his authority be over the forces of chaos in the human world? What might he do in face of armies, in the chaos of power and violence that left everyone helpless?

For one thing he would ask them to believe: “How can you be so afraid? Don't you have any faith?”

They came to an area on the other side of the lake where the people were not Israelites. They were pig herders, a lucrative business surely but not one for Israelites who regarded the pig as unclean. There they were confronted by a violent lunatic, a man of enormous strength who lived among the tombs, howling and damaging himself. People had tried to control him, to chain him up, but he snapped the best chains they had and they were forced to leave him loose among the graves.

When Jesus saw him, he saw a man possessed and a terror to his own community; and who knows what terrors, what disorder, corruption or injustice in the community has contributed to this dreadful stand-off: the maniac no one could subdue against a little rural community that just wanted to raise pigs and make a safe living in that harsh world. Jesus commanded the demon to leave him and the man shrieked in terror:

“What do you want with me? Swear by God you won't torture me!”

And Jesus asked: “What is your name?”

It is an old idea common to many cultures, that knowing the name of your opponent gives you power over them. But here it is clear that Jesus needs no such power: the demon is already begging for mercy and Jesus has other reasons for demanding his name. Here is an evil that must be identified: something terrible that afflicts not only this one man but his whole community, leaving them utterly powerless before uncontrollable forces of destruction. Jesus will know what it is.

The demon answered: “My name is Legion. There are many of us.”

Legion! The spirit has a Roman name! At once there is conjured up the terrible, irresistible power and inexhaustible numbers of the Roman army. Suddenly you see the Roman legion, the supreme military deployment of the day. You can hear the

pounding drums, the terrifying blare of trumpets and the thud, thud of marching feet. Men shielded with iron, wielding death in their swords and spears; engines to batter down strong walls and to hurl great rocks and fire; archers and cavalry and all in numbers unimaginably large coming back and back after every revolt to crush and to kill and enslave. The demon is named Legion.

Suddenly you see the brutalities of the ages, of barons, kings and emperors wielding destruction by power and technology and the vast numbers of their army. You see the reality of Rome, behind its façade of justice, peace and order. And you see the modern conquerors who in their turn inherit power to damage the earth. You see the British gunboats and the armies of an empire in the making, crushing native opposition to the dictates of British business and trade. You see the wielding of destructive power not by admittedly evil people but by men and nations held to be good – just as the Romans believed their legions and their leaders to be good, and their empire an imposition of civilisation and order throughout the world. You see the people of Iraq killed with poison gas, not by Saddam Hussein but by Winston Churchill glorying in the power of British planes to bomb and gas Iraqi tribesmen.

You see the terrifying speed and firepower of Hitler's Panzers, the Blitzkrieg, the vast deployment of armour and the screaming stukas in the sky, an army that only ten million Russian deaths could stop and turn back. You see the pitiless rain of bombs, napalm and poison on Vietnam and the invincible legions of modern America, the aircraft carriers, the bombers, the missiles, by death and terror imposing the American way wherever there is opposition to it.

Legion is the demon that confronts Jesus in this poor man, but he commands the demon to leave the man, and Legion has to obey. Leaving their victim, they flee into the pigs grazing on the slopes beside the lake. The whole episode had a disastrous ending, as the possessed animals, in a frenzy, rushed into the lake and were drowned. But Jesus is victorious, and the man is found sitting sane and at peace. The community is free from the terror that had threatened them, but at what cost! If not the ordinary folk then some vast landowner, the lord of 2000 pigs and employer of many locals was vastly out of pocket and would not be an easy man to get on with for some time.

Who is this man who comes with such threatening power? It was wonderful to hear no more the screams of the madman and to fear no more his strength and violence, but what had happened to the pigs, what would the owners say, what new uncontrollable powers had this man brought among them?

The local people did not know what to make of it. Tho released from terror, they were not sure that their freedom was a safe one. Perhaps because they were not Israelites, they had no encouraging tradition by which to interpret this liberation from demonic power. All they could see was that Jesus brought trouble, and they begged him to go away. For once, he allowed himself to be turned back. He was learning, I think, that here, outside of the knowledge and the traditions of Israel, tho the power of God was real and effective as anywhere, its effect on people and communities was even less predictable. With the best will in the world, these foreigners needed more preparation before they could understand.

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When Jesus got back into the boat, the man who had been healed asked to go with him; but Jesus saw in this request a better way forward. It would not be for him to go among the gentiles with the news of God's kingdom, but in its own proper way the news would reach them too. The former madman himself would be the messenger. So Jesus told him to stay behind, and to go around his people with the news of the good that God had done for him. (It was the opposite of his instructions to the people in his own community!)

The man went around the whole region of the Decapolis (the Ten Towns) telling people what Jesus had done for him. (Mark 5: 20)

Wherever Jesus went crowds were gathering round him and his power went on liberating and healing. A woman who had suffered for twelve years from a hemorrhage came up to him in the crowd and simply touched his clothes, believing that this would heal her. And it did, but before she could slip away, Jesus challenged her. He knew that someone among all those people around him, pressing against him, had drawn power from him, and he asked who had touched him. The woman owned up, and Jesus showed her that it was not some magic effect in his clothes, but the faith in which she had made the effort to touch him which was the channel of God's power.

Your faith has made you well. (Mark 5: 34)

Wherever he met the faith of people who came to him in their need, Jesus was able to work wonders. And his wonders always liberated: they were the opposite of spell-binding. He restored a little girl who had gone into a deep coma, so far from consciousness that people thought she was dead. But when he went to his hometown, to Nazareth, it was all very different. There everyone knew him only too well. They knew exactly who he was: the young builder, Miriam's son. His family, all his brothers and sisters, were still with them in Nazareth. There was nothing special about him. It was the old syndrome of the prophet in his own country, and unfortunately the people of Nazareth let familiarity get in the way.

Where there was no faith, Jesus could do little. He could work no miracles in Nazareth, tho he cured a few sick people by laying hands on them.

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Faith, the believing trust that moved people to put themselves in God's hands, was absolutely necessary. The coming rule of God sought it out, but Jesus found it was not always there in the people of the towns he visited. So we come back to the question with which we ended the last chapter: What about the disciples who were closest to him - were they the ones who would learn to understand and believe?

Jesus called the twelve whom he had particularly chosen, empowered them to cast out demons, and sent them off around the villages to preach repentance and to heal the sick:<sup>1</sup> they too were to announce the coming of God's kingdom. They were to go simply, without money or baggage, relying on the hospitality of the villagers. That they were twelve was significant, for that recalled the twelve sons of Jacob who were the beginning of Israel, the fathers of the tribes. This was not just a religious revival, but the long-awaited restoration of Israel itself.

There follow in Mark's gospel three episodes that show quite clearly the import of Jesus' mission: the story of King Herod's court and the execution of John the Baptist; the miraculous feeding of Jesus' followers in the wilderness; and his clash with the Pharisees over eating and fundraising. These episodes set Jesus' mission firmly in the context of the government of Israel, and point to the true order of government in which the rule of God would be established. They do not leave us the option of Jesus' mission as a purely religious or other-worldly one: it is about the rule of God over his people in the world they inhabit, and it contrasts and clashes with the way of Israel's current rulers and leaders.

First there is the account of Herod's court, a story of luxury, self-indulgence, glamour, pride and bitter enmity. It is unlike any other story in the gospel, and I used to wonder why it was there. It reminds us of a world that Jesus largely ignored, the world of power and luxury around the Jewish king of Galilee. Herod had founded two new and important cities in Galilee, but there is no indication that Jesus ever visited them. Here money had triumphed and the wealth that came to the king as a dutiful servant of Roman power established a way of living on the fruits of power that was utterly alien to the rule of God.

Herod had taken and married his brother's wife. As one of the last descendants of the Hasmonean family, the great liberators of the Jews a century and a half before, she brought to his throne prestige and a claim on popular esteem, always useful even to a king backed by Rome. John had criticised the marriage and was now in prison for his presumption, and Herod's wife Herodias was bent on having him executed. Herod himself, it appears, had some deep religious scruples (such as not uncommonly go with evil and power) and was fascinated by John's teaching. He would have kept him in prison, but Herodias' hatred and cunning knew how to force his hand. She persuaded her daughter to dance for Herod at his birthday celebration, where the king, enchanted by the girl and flattered that a high-born woman should so entertain his guests, invited her to name her reward. Prompted by her mother, she had named the head of John the Baptist, and Herod, rather than admit to weakness and an inability to deliver before his guests, had John executed.

Here was one model for the rule of Israel, one pretender to authority: a king backed by the power that had subdued the world, well able to impose his will and with all the trappings of luxury to demonstrate his worth. Here was dynastic authority in realistic and practical alliance with military power: it ruled Galilee effectively and enriched itself enormously. But in the end it was a power that could be manipulated and forced. Evil as it was, it only left itself open to those who would trap it into deeper evil.

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When Jesus' disciples returned from their mission to the villages, he took them out into the wilderness, to get away, for a space, from too many people and to rest a while. It was hardly Moses leading Israel out into the wilderness, at least as Jesus planned it, but the people of Israel had their own promptings to follow. Enuf of them saw where Jesus and his friends had gone, and enuf of them told others, and soon the crowds had followed Jesus into the wilderness anyway. Jesus took pity on them, for

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they were a people like sheep without a shepherd, and there in the wilderness, whatever he and his friends had planned, he began teaching the people again. It was like Moses leading the children of Israel after all.

“Sheep without a shepherd” reminds us of the messianic promise in the psalms:

He chose David his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds,  
to pasture his people Jacob, and Israel his heritage. (Psalm 78: 70 – 71)

and of the prophet Ezekiel castigating the corrupt rulers of Israel before the exile:

Woe for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves on milk, dress  
themselves in wool but do not feed the flock! You have not strengthened the  
weak ones or cared for the sick and wounded ones. You have failed to bring  
back the strays or look for the lost. Your rule has been cruel and violent and  
without a shepherd my flock has been scattered. No one bothers about them;  
no one looks after them. (Ezk 34: 2 – 6)

Set between the story of Herod, the supposed and official ruler of these people and the story of Jesus’ clash with the Pharisees, their would-be leaders and guides, this episode points unequivocally to Jesus as the true leader and ruler of his people. Not just a “religious” teacher talking about another world but the leader and new founder of his nation restoring their whole society, under God. He was leading his people into the wilderness, teaching them there and feeding them (we shall see) like Moses, who had led Israel out of Egypt, finding food for them in the wilderness and giving them the founding laws of their nation.

For when Jesus had been talking with them for a long time and the day had worn on, they were all very hungry, and a long way from habitation, where they might have got food. The disciples came and urged him to send the people away while there was still time for them to get to the farms and villages and buy food there, but Jesus suggested “Why don’t you feed them yourselves?” They hadn’t the money to cater for the huge crowd that was there, so Jesus asked them “How much food have we got with us?” They went and checked, but the tally was disappointing: “Five loaves and two fishes.”

Jesus got the people sitting down “in hundreds and fifties” like an army in camp, then he took the five loaves and two fishes and, looking up to God, blessed them and started giving them to his disciples to distribute among the people. In the end a crowd of thousands was fed and twelve baskets were filled with left over scraps of bread and pieces of fish.

The meaning of the miracle is unmistakable. Jesus, like Moses, has risen to the leadership of Israel. Finding them like sheep without a shepherd, he has stepped in to be their leader, he has nourished their minds and spirits; he has fed their bodies. Through him, God has provided in the wilderness, just as he did through Moses. We should not imagine for a moment that this feeding is all a parable of “spiritual” nourishment, unconnected with political or economic actualities. Moses’ ability to feed his people in the wilderness had become the great test of his leadership. With him the Israelites had experienced their wonderful liberation from slavery in Egypt, just as the crowds who followed Jesus had seen or experienced liberation from the power of demons.

But the Israelites of old, stranded in the wilderness without food, had panicked and questioned Moses' leadership, till God answered them sending as food the abundant manna. This was the miracle that Jesus had repeated, and Mark has so set it that we cannot miss its political significance. It stands in deliberate contrast to the previous story, where Herod, the official shepherd and provider for the people of Galilee, has laid on a sumptuous banquet for his few chosen and powerful friends. Jesus lays on simple, life-sustaining fare for a huge crowd of ordinary people.

The theme of feeding runs thru these three episodes, Herod's banquet, the feeding in the wilderness and (still to come) the argument about eating laws. It connects them together and in fact it carries on into the next story, of the woman he met in Tyre. Galilee was an agricultural region, as it still is, and the people of Galilee could see their food growing in the fields around them. And they knew the hunger of a bad year when drouth left the land barren, sending food prices sky high in the markets. So it was not hard for them to appreciate the basic and necessary resource that food is.

Besides that, there are for all human beings profound psychological associations between feeding, eating, caring, belonging and ruling. It is a powerful theme and we should not miss its political significance for our own society. Thruout history power has lain in the hands of those who control the food supply: landowners or merchants. A strong arm and a hevvy fist, military genius and a huge army, all help of course, but in the end kingdoms or empires built on brute force quickly collapse. Those that survive are those that consolidate their power with control over vast supplies of food. The Romans controlled the farms of Italy, Gaul and North Africa, and, especially, the huge granary that was Egypt. (Later, Britain became vital to them for the same reason.) In the middle ages, control was in the hands of feudal lords who owned all the food-producing land and took their taxes in grain and food-producing work. The greatest of colonial empires, that of Britain, built its strength first from the combined food production of England and Ireland, and then from grain- and grass-lands all over the world, which fed the workers for its industrial revolution. Now, as we enter the twenty-first century, tho much glamour attaches to information management and technology, and much power attaches to the big players in the oil industry, the companies that control the world's food supply are the longest-term players. Behind the insistence of the United States and Europe (and the IMF) that the impoverished but fertile countries of the third world should fit themselves into the North American and European market, supplying the "profitable" cash crops those markets want, lies a ruthless determination to retain into yet another century the old colonial domination of the world's food resources.

I have long been fascinated by etymology, the study of the origin of words, and some time ago I noticed that I couldn't account for the origin of the English word "lord" or its feminine "lady". In all the other European languages, so far as I knew them, the corresponding words derived from basic words connected either with "older" (senior) or "higher" - which made sense. But where had "lord" and "lady" come from? I looked them up in my Concise Oxford Dictionary. And I found that "lord" derives from the old English "hlafweard" meaning "bread warden", and "lady" derives from the old English "hlaefdige" "bread-maker". The holder of power was the one who controlled the community's food.

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The astonishing thing is, that Jesus' disciples did not understand what they had witnessed. Whatever they thought about the kingdom of God, they failed to see that it was already happening around them, in the crowds, in Jesus, in the wilderness.

After the people had been fed, Jesus first sent his disciples off in the boat and then persuaded the crowd to go home. He then went up on a mountain to pray and from there he could see his disciples struggling to row against a contrary wind. They had all set out for a quiet time together in the wilderness, a time to refresh themselves and for Jesus to reflect with them on the experiences of their mission around the villages, a calm debriefing and reflection time. But it had turned into something quite different: larger, more dependent crowds than ever; a heavy demand on their energy, faith and resources – and in the end, there were the disciples, going back the way they had come, their holiday turned into an exhausting struggle against the wind and the sea, and split up, by quite some distance over the water, from Jesus. It all seemed to have gone horribly wrong – literally fallen apart.

No wonder Jesus needed to pray. He needed to know the way forward, since it clearly wasn't the obvious way that he had planned. It was like that morning in Capernaum when everything was going so well, but he had gone out to pray, to find out from God which way they should go from here.

Serious things had happened that day in the wilderness. Like Moses he had found himself leading and feeding the people; like Moses he was not himself their resourceful provider but the one who acted in God's power for them; but, unlike Moses, he did not keep the people with him, to lead them on thru victories to their promised land.<sup>1</sup> He had sent them home. The renewal of Israel and of God's covenant with his people, of which they had seen today so powerful a demonstration, was not to continue down that road. Something else was called for.

Jesus had made a serious choice in sending the people home, and in his prayer he realised where God was leading him in that choice. His place was with his disciples, with the twelve he had chosen and sent out with the news and the power of the kingdom. They would constitute the necessary team of leaders to teach Israel what he had taught them. The kingdom would continue with them, and thru them with the rest of the people. Their mission (which they had not yet had time to talk over properly) had been the right way forward – not Jesus leading a hungry army. His place was therefore with them: there was his work and the way forward. Nothing should now keep him from getting back to them.

I don't know if Mark had it in mind, but I am reminded of Elijah, after the miracle on Mount Carmel, coming down from the mountain and with amazing energy running to the city of Jezreel faster than Ahab could make the journey in his chariot, there to complete the revolution and the restoration of Israel.<sup>2</sup> And I cannot help remembering that Elijah was bitterly disappointed.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, John's gospel tells us that at this point the people wanted to make Jesus their king and that he had gone into the hills to slip away from them.

<sup>2</sup> I Kings 18: 46, 19: 1 - 3

Jesus came down from the mountain and made his way to the disciples, who were still battling against nature to make any progress. He was walking across the water. And they were making even less progress than he had reckoned, for he was going to pass ahead of them. But seeing him and thinking it was a ghost on the water, they cried out in fear. Jesus spoke to them. "It's me; don't be afraid." He got into the boat and the wind dropped. They were on course again. They were dumbfounded. They didn't know what to make of it. They had seen the miracle in the wilderness but they didn't know what it ment. I guess they were still waiting for some spectacular event to inaugurate the kingdom. They could not see that it had already begun and that they were in the thick of it. What Jesus had seen and learnt from the day, they had not. Perhaps they had not learnt to go to God and pray, as Jesus did.

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Back in Galilee, they were once again going around the towns and villages and farms, and people were responding to them. But the Pharisees also were responding, in their own way, and once again scribes were there from Jerusalem, checking up on him. Here was that other claim to power and leadership in Israel, based on the temple or on knowledge of the ancient covenant and the Law of God. In terms of practical power, such people had none of the clout of Herod and his court. The Romans hadn't chosen them to rule Galilee, and even in Judea, under the Roman governor's direct rule, their power was limited. But in terms of moral authority their influence was much greater. They could make a fair claim to be the ones to rule if Israel were restored as it should be, under the law of God. In essence, their hopes too, like those of Jesus and his followers, were for the restoration of Israel in its freedom under God. If they clashed with Jesus, it was a clash between different ways with much common ground over which to differ. There was something alien about Herod and his kingdom, but with the Pharisees it was more like civil war. While Jesus seems to have dismissed Herod, he clashed with the Pharisees.

This time there was a dispute about eating. The experts from Jerusalem had seen Jesus' disciples eating and they pointed out that the correct procedure, at least for those who sought to be exemplary teachers or leaders in Israel, was to wash your hands carefully, from elbow to fingers, every time before you eat. This was the tradition of their respected forefathers, the very ones who had preserved faithfully the law of God thru generations of hostility and neglect.

We should not caricature the Pharisees as merely hypocrites and pedantic legalists. They are castigated as such in the gospels precisely because their vision was nearer to the message of Jesus. Only a generation before, some two thousand Pharisees had bravely refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Emperor Augustus, but the legalism and hypocrisy into which they fell had at its root their understanding of power and their desire to get it and keep it when they could. This was the particular corruption of the good in them that otherwise might have welcomed and served the kingdom of God.

Nor should we imagine that there was a quarrel between the Pharisees going by spoken tradition and Jesus relying on the written scriptures, like Catholics arguing with Protestants. That dispute only came up 1500 years later, with the invention of printing. In Jesus time, everybody relied on the spoken tradition, the stories that told

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Israel's story and kept alive among them God's covenant and God's law. That the "writings" were held in great respect and awe was perhaps in part because they were so rarely seen. It was not because everyone could refer to them for a decision. Only a few had access to the writings, and, as I said before, there was no complete agreement as to which of them carried authority as sacred writing.

Nor, finally, should we imagine that arguments about the law of God were therefore about purely "religious" matters. It was precisely because the law of God would govern the whole of society that it was so fiercely in dispute among them. In fact, taking these three episodes together, the story of Herod, that of the feeding in the wilderness, and this of the clash with the Pharisees, we have to conclude that people who think the gospels are not political are not reading the gospel according to Mark, or, more probably, only reading it in disconnected bits where they do not see the whole story.

Behind the little technicalities of washing and eating lay much more serious issues. For most of their history, the people of Galilee, the Israelites, had maintained their independence of Jerusalem or been separately governed anyway, under various imperial arrangements. Only for some short periods during the last two centuries had Jerusalem held any political power over Galilee, and it had become an important matter of policy to the Judean leaders to bring the Israelites of Galilee into their way of thinking and interpreting God's law. They could thereby extend their moral authority and influence where Roman law gave them no political or military power.

Knowledge and practice of the law was therefore an instrument of power. Jesus quickly moved the argument onto the real issue:

"You're very good at getting around the commandments to uphold your own traditions. Moses told us to 'Honor and care for your mother and father' but you say that if anyone dedicates to God what would have been used to support their parents, then that money remains dedicated and cannot be used for the parents."

The real issue, as so often, was about power and money. The Jerusalem authorities had no power to raise money from the public. Some of them, the leading priestly families in particular, were enormously wealthy in their own right, but it would seem that, except for a "temple tax", they had no power to raise any other money. The Romans, of course, would impose whatever taxes they thought they could squeeze from the economy without provoking too large a revolt, and kings like Herod, approved by the Romans, could also impose taxes. But the Jerusalem leaders and their allies, who saw themselves as the rightful rulers of God's people, had to rely on donations. It was very important to them, if they were to fund their activities throughout the country without emptying their own pockets, to give the maximum encouragement to pious donations from all over Israel.

This led to some nice distinctions in law. A man of some substance who wanted to be in good standing with the leaders might nonetheless be reluctant to part with his own wealth to assist them or the temple. But if he could be shown an easier way... He could dedicate to God (i.e. donate to the temple treasury) that part of his money that would otherwise be given to support his parents: two duties covered for the price of one. I don't suppose the scribes encouraged anyone to leave their parents in dire

poverty – but where the choices were not so dire, where the parents were only moderately poor ...

The issue throughout has been one of power. With rule and government and leadership come power, money and influence, and from power, money and influence comes a stronger, tighter grip on government – a virtuous circle for the privileged. Herod held power and used it to enforce his will and to enjoy a life of luxury. The Pharisees and the Jerusalem officials aspired to power over Israel, to be at the centre (some of them no doubt with the best of intentions) of their own virtuous circle of money, power and control. And Jesus, who had no power, drew every day on the liberating power of God to heal and to nourish God's people.

There should be no doubt about where the kingdom of God was coming about.

And yet there was a doubt, and the doubt was about Jesus. Who was he and what was his role? If he had kept the people with him after he had fed them in the wilderness; if he had led them back from there to Galilee to claim their freedom and the new reign of God over Israel, that would have been clear enough. Jesus of Nazareth would have been the Messiah, the liberator and new ruler of Israel. But he had sent the people home and gone out across the lake to rejoin those twelve disciples.