

24 The Challenge

20:1 – 21:4

Every day he was teaching in the temple and altho the leading priests, the lawyers and other men of influence in Jerusalem wanted to put an end to him, they could not, because he was too popular.

One day, while he was teaching and telling people the good news, a delegation of priests, lawyers and prominent citizens came up and asked him to explain himself: “Tell us by what right you act like this. Who gave you the authority?” It was a reasonable question. They were the authorities in the temple, and altho anyone mite speak, Jesus mite reasonably be asked – at least by someone qualified to judge in matters of authority – by what authority he made free with the temple like this, driving out the traders and making it a base for his teaching.

The authorities were probably trying to draw Jesus into some claim they could challenge, one that could be made to look too arrogant or too timid to the audience. (It’s still the normal technique whenever political debate goes public. You don’t dwell on the issues, but try to draw your opponent into a statement that won’t go down well – watch the news conferences or televised debates in any election campaign.) We, of course, will be reminded of that day when he had calmly stated that this was his Father’s house. Only Jesus was not now going to give the temple leaders any answer they could use or misuse. Insted, he showed how ill-equipped they were to judge in matters of authority.

He put his own question to them: Was John’s baptism something from heven, or was it just a human invention? It was a question they couldn’t answer: for if they sed it was from heven, it was well known that the priests had not accepted John’s message, and they would be admitting their failure to recognise the authority of heven. But if they sed it was a human invention of John’s, there would be outrage among the people, who alredy looked on him as a martyred prophet. John was a question they preferred to leave closed.

So they lamely replied “We don’t know where it was from,” and Jesus declined to give them any account of his own authority. They had excluded themselves as judges.

Insted, he told the people this parable:

A man planted a vineyard and let it out to farmers. Then he went away for some time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the farmers to claim his share of the crop, but they beat him up and sent him back empty-handed. The owner decided to send another servant, but they beat him up as well, deliberately humiliated him and sent him back empty-handed. The owner determined to send a third servant, but he was sent back badly injured. So the owner sed, "What can I do? I will send them my son and heir; perhaps they will respect him." But when the farmers saw him coming, they hatched a plan: "This is the heir. Let's kill him so that we get his inheritance." So they hauled him out of the vineyard and killed him.

What will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and wipe out those farmers and give the vineyard to others.

(20: 9 – 16)

For some of those listening, this was too much. "God forbid!" they sed. Not that it was outrageous to think that, after theft and murder, a man of power would bring justice on those who had been foolish enuf to perpetrate such crimes. What his hearers could not accept was that this should be a description of God and Israel. They recognised the story only too well, for the prophet Isaiah had told of a vineyard which was Israel, and of God's anger with Israel; but Jesus had developed it so that it was focused on the tenant holders of the vineyard, the leaders who "possessed" Israel and were charged with caring for the vineyard. They had failed, and God's judgement would be on them. No doubt they also recognised, (at least the priests and scribes would) in the repetition of servants sent to secure obedience, their own Book of Chronicles' summing up the history of Judah before the Exile:

All the heads of the priesthood and the people too added unfaithfulness to unfaithfulness, copying the disgraceful practices of the foreigners and defiling the Temple that Yahweh had consecrated for himself in Jerusalem. Yahweh, the God of their ancestors, tirelessly sent them messenger after messenger; but they ridiculed the messengers of God, they despised his words, they laughed at his prophets until at last the anger of God was so roused against his people that there was no further remedy. (II Chr 36: 14 – 16 JB)

They strenuously rejected the warning that God mite condemn Israel and dismiss its leadership. "God forbid!" The pious could not accept that God

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would repudiate those he had blessed and put in charge of his vineyard, the priests, the learned in the Law, the men of family and wealth who were clearly Israel's leadership.

But Jesus saw a sharp contrast between the choices made in Israel's political establishment and the choices of God. They had their way of building the nation, but God had other plans:

“Tell me the meaning of this scripture,”¹ he said, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” adding: “Anyone who falls onto this stone will be dashed to pieces; anyone it falls upon will be crushed.” (20: 17-18)

The temple authorities could very easily have given Jesus an answer, if he had not added that warning. The psalms were their business, and this psalm with its parable of the cornerstone would be one of their favourites. For the psalm spoke of the greatness of Yahweh and his goodness to his people, how he rescued them in distress, gave them victory over their enemies, even swarming hoards of enemies. There are shouts of joy in the tents of the virtuous, at the victories of Yahweh, for Yahweh's people are the tribes of Israel whose ancestors lived in tents as they herded their flocks. But now they live in the House of God and the temple gates, flanked with pillars, are open to the virtuous. Here is righteousness, here is virtue rewarded, in the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, and here may the people come celebrating, gathered with branches in their hands, on the Lord's great Day.

If ever patriotism, national identity, pride of the people, trust in God, confidence and virtue found voice in one great hymn, it was here, in this psalm of celebration in the Temple. The temple authorities would have been delighted to give Jesus their interpretation of the psalm. I imagine that they commonly drew the parallel between Israel of old, despised by the empire-builders of Assyria and Babylon or the mighty kings of the Hellenic era, but chosen to be God's people; and Israel of their own day, no more than a small province to be crushed by the plans of mighty Rome, but God's people still, chosen by him for who knows what greatness to come.

And close behind that interpretation, but diplomatically unspoken, would be the comparison between the powerful Roman rulers, the governor with his army, or Rome's ally Herod, and the genuine leaders of Israel, the priesthood and their faithful allies. Who could be more truly representative of that

¹ Psalm 118:22

chosen rock, the cornerstone, than God's chosen and blessed priesthood, the rightful but overlooked rulers of Israel?

But Jesus forestalled them with Isaiah's version of the great stone who is God himself. Isaiah too had been the scourge of Jerusalem's leaders, especially of hypocrisy and injustice. He had clashed with them and been denounced by them but God had told him to ignore their warnings and to fear no one but God himself. God is the stone on which many stumble and the rock that brings the "Houses", the national establishments, of Israel and of Judah crashing down.² It is the real integrity of God that exposes the unreliability of Israel's leadership.

Taking them back to Isaiah, from the more self-congratulatory psalm, Jesus returns them to a period when Judah and Jerusalem were comparatively independent, but frequently betrayed by bad leadership, by counsellors who thought they could stitch up a deal with lies and subterfuge and spin their way out of trouble. It's against that kind of leadership that God plants his cornerstone of integrity in Jerusalem.³ There is an integrity that will crush the plans not of the Romans, but of Israel's own leadership. They, and the system they uphold in Israel, will not survive it.

Not only has Jesus taken over the temple court and the attention of their people, but he has taken the temple's Book of Chronicles and one of the its songs of worship and raised it against them; and he has resurrected Isaiah's fierce criticism of Israel's leaders. No wonder they wanted to arrest him right away, but could not, for fear of a popular reaction.

They tried other tactics. One was to raise an issue close to their hearts, and close to the people's hearts – as it always is.

Teacher, we know that you speak and teach honestly and you're no respecter of personages but teach the way of God with integrity. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? (20: 21 – 22)

Sweet talking from agents of the temple, under the guise of genuine enquiry! They thought they might trap him into saying something subversive, an excuse to get him handed over to the governor. But Jesus saw thru their scheme. He said, "Show me a Denarius. Whose likeness and title are on it?" "Caesar's," they said. And he said to them, "In that case, give Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's."

² Isaiah 8: 11 – 15

³ Isaiah 28: 14 - 18

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You might say that the agents of the temple being delegated to raise the question of taxes was a Freudian giveaway. I have no doubt that the Priests and Jerusalem leaders would have liked to refuse the Romans their taxes. They would have liked to impose their own taxes as sovereign leaders of a sovereign nation – surely that was the liberty that the psalm had celebrated. But their power was much curtailed, and they were not allowed to charge taxes, except, apparently, a temple tax, which we can be sure did not get priority over the larger taxes taken by the Romans or Herod. But if even they accepted the realities of power in their day, buying and selling with the Roman currency, they could not expect to put the teacher on the spot with a trick question about paying Roman taxes.

Then the opposition started to break apart. Some of the Sadducees (pre-eminently the party of the priests) tackled him on the question of the resurrection of the dead, in which the Sadducees did not believe. (We take it for granted that priests, and religions generally, must believe in life after death, but traditional Hebrew religion, and many of the Jewish priesthood, did not.) They put to him the conundrum of the woman who had been married successively to seven brothers, all of whom had died leaving her childless. (The Law enjoined that when a man dies leaving his widow childless, his next brother must take her and beget a child in his brother's name.⁴) When all of them, and the woman, rise in the resurrection from the dead, whose wife will she be?

This time, Jesus did not dismiss the question. He corrected their idea of the resurrection, for he did believe in the coming resurrection, as had many Jews since the time of the Maccabees. But that resurrection is not simply a return to life as we now know it. It is life in a new age, an entirely new and different era of the world and those who have been found worthy of that new world and the resurrection from the dead, will no longer live as husbands and wives, for they can no longer die, but, sharing in the resurrection, live like the angels as children of God.

Marriage, in the context of the Sadducees' question and the law that stood behind it, is a matter of begetting and bearing children and raising the generation that will replace us when we are gone. That is why it was important for the brother of a man who had died childless to beget a child for his brother, so that his brother too might have a generation to succeed him. So Jesus is not trying to describe the future life as "spiritual" or disembodied – it is a real resurrection – but he is throwing it open to dimensions that are no longer limited by death.

⁴ Deuteronomy 25: 5 - 10

The other point to notice is that altho Jesus believed in the resurrection, he has not made it central to his teaching. This rare excursion into the subject serves to remind us how far removed is Jesus' thinking from many of our traditional emphases. He believed in the resurrection, and we know from the Book of Maccabees⁵ how vivid, convinced and precious was that belief for the Jews who held it. If Jesus did not dwell on it, it is because his conviction of the transformation of Israel in the coming kingdom of God was even more concrete, sure and precious.

Even in the lite of his belief in another age and life beyond the resurrection, Jesus remained focused on the coming of the kingdom, its impact in the world where it meets and engages us.

The reality of that future life is affirmed not by diminishing the reality of this, but by recognising the utter, concrete and living reality of God, who speaking to Moses from the burning bush, described Godself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God does not identify himself by the dead, but by God's chosen and living servants. Some of the scribes (lawyers) agreed with him – this was an issue where the opposition were not united – and they applauded his answer to the Sadducees.

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Jesus himself has a question to raise, a question about the Messiah. It has not been part of his teaching to present himself as the Messiah, but he has been hailed as Son of David and he entered Jerusalem acclaimed as the King. Now he questions the title "Son of David" as applied to the Messiah, and his question turns on the title "Kyrios" or "Lord". That word which we translate as "Lord" is loaded: ambiguous, not in the sense of being doubtful, but in the sense of holding a number of meanings which necessarily stand together, to be drawn out differently in different contexts.

"Kyrios", at its minimum, is no more than a term of respectful address: "Sir". But it means "master" too, the head of the household, or the owner of land and property who has servants or slaves at his command. The "kyrios" was the master for whom the servants waited up, who appointed stewards to manage his household, the landlord whom we should ask to send more workers for the harvest. Jesus himself was spoken of as "kyrios", "the master", and Martha, when she protested at Mary's truancy, addressed him so. At a higher (!) level it was the title for that one who was master over all the people, the King, and especially the one who ruled all kings, the

⁵ II Maccabees Ch 7; 12: 38 – 45

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Commander-in-Chief ⁶ in Rome. Caesar was Kyrios. A god mite be styled “Kyrios”, and where the title applied to Caesar, it could be used to attribute divine status to him.

At its highest and fullest, the word was used by Jews to address or to speak about God. They had long since ceased to pronounce the name of God, Yahweh, which they found written in their Hebrew scriptures, but they sed the title “Adonai” which is often attached to it. “Adonai” means “Lord”. When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, the word “Kyrios” was used where the name of God appeared, and so God was “ho Kyrios” – in English, “the Lord”.

Within this rich and diverse usage Jesus raised his question about the Messiah:

Why do they say that the Messiah is David’s son? David himself says in the Book of Psalms: “The Lord sed to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand while I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ ” If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son? (20: 41 – 42, quoting Psalm 110: 1)

Jesus had not gone about claiming titles or putting himself forward for status. He taut about the coming kingdom of God, its enormous promise for those who will welcome it and its challenge to the ruling elite and their systems of power. And he taut people how to live – to live very differently – under the rule of God.

But it is important who he is. Luke has told us how the angels announced Jesus as the son of David, Son of God, Messiah and Lord, so we know what the people listening to him in the temple don’t know yet. We have been told how, at the time of Baptism from John, Jesus had heard the voice of God affirming: “You are my own dear Son.” People, including Herod, had speculated about who he mite be; and Peter, the foremost of Jesus’ disciples had recognised that he was the Messiah. But only a few were with Peter and Jesus on that occasion, and fewer still were with him on the mountain, when they heard the Voice of God proclaim, “This is my own dear Son.”

Jesus did not put himself forward to claim any title, and those who are prepared to stick a label on him are likely to get it wrong. The only effective way to discuss or discover who Jesus mite be is to remain focused on the work of God as it is carried out in him, on what he does, and what happens,

⁶ This was the meaning of the title we translate “Emperor”.

on what he teaches about the life of the kingdom, and the effect of his teaching on us.

So when Jesus raises his question about the proper status of the Messiah, it can be taken two ways: for us who hear the gospel as Luke is telling it, this is a clarification. To say that the Messiah, Jesus, is the Son of David, the heir and rightful king over Jerusalem, is not to say enuf. He is also David's master, or Lord. He is the "Kyrios" in such a pre-eminent way that even mity David addresses him as such.

To the listeners in the temple, however, it could work the other way round, as a dampener. If enthusiasm is building its own ideas around the acclamation of Jesus as Son of David, conjuring up dreams of the Messiah according to their own ideas of what the Messiah must be and what he must do when he comes, this is a sobering reminder that the Messiah is something more than Son of David. Without renouncing the title by which his disciples had acclaimed him as he entered Jerusalem, (that can't be suppressed, or the very stones of the temple would shout it out) he is telling people that they must think again before they rush ahead with the idea that he is the Messiah. They must think what it is to be Kyrios, Lord, in a sense higher than the king's.

Or better still, they must listen and follow, and see what is about to happen, and so learn what it really is to be Kyrios above all.

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What it is not, to be Kyrios, Jesus tells them strait away. He spoke to his disciples, but the whole crowd was listening too.

Take care you don't follow the example of the scribes (the experts in the law). They like to get around in the fine clothes of their station and enjoy being greeted respectfully in the market place. They like to have front seats at the community meeting (the synagogue) and top couches at the banquet. They gobble up the houses of widows, while they show off with their long prayers. Their punishment will be severe.

For how many centuries have the followers of Jesus ignored what is almost his final advice? (For we are very close to the end now and only a little more will conclude his teaching.) From Mediaeval bishops in their elaborate finery to the non-conformist minister who makes a great point and show of sober black; from the powerful renaissance Pope to the millionaire televangelist, welth, status, prestige and power, we have sought and had it all. But let us

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not fall into old habits. Jesus is not just talking about church figures and church behavior. He is talking about the way it is in society and the world, and how it is not to be any more, for his followers.

The scribes, experts in the Law, were key figures in the organisation of Israelite society. The Law was what the leaders of Israel had, to shape and direct the behavior of the Israelite people. It was the basis for the power of the scribes, and for the influence of people like the Pharisees, and the rationale of the priests' authority. The Romans, like all successful imperialists, were content to let subject people run their own affairs and maintain their own hierarchies of importance and influence – as long as all acknowledged the highest authority of Rome, paid taxes and bowed to the power of the Roman army. Within the sphere of self-government that remained to them, Israel shaped her community, as she had done for generations now, with increasing reference to the Law of Moses, the Law of God.

Jesus was decrying the behavior not of purely religious leaders, but of the very masters of society. He was not denouncing this-worldly behavior where there should be a more other-worldly focus. He was denouncing the wrong kind of behavior for this world. He was telling his disciples to manage the world and their career in it in a very different way.

We have come to the last incident in Jesus' teaching, and it is closely connected to the previous. They were watching the procession of temple benefactors, for the temple treasury, or at least its public chest, was in a place where all could see it. Donations were encouraged. To be seen contributing, especially if the sum were substantial, was a matter of considerable kudos, being a public demonstration of your wealth (your ability to give so much), your pious generosity and your patriotism. As in modern politics, those who gave most were probably assured of influence in decisions affecting their interests. In any case, it enhanced their reputation with the people.

The priesthood and the layers of experts and practitioners around the Law had, as I have said, great moral and traditional influence. They were also, many of them, wealthy, and wealth gave them a claim to leadership. But they needed funds to extend and support their power (we shall shortly see that they needed money, among other things, to bribe agents and traitors to get difficult things done). The temple tax which the priests were allowed to collect was not enough on its own for all their ambitions. Donating to the Temple was not just generous philanthropy; it was patriotic support for your

native leaders. It was very much in the authorities' interest to hype up the drama of giving.

Together with the notable benefactors whose contributions went down with a clatter, to advertise their wealth and their patriotism, a poor widow came forward to give two farthings. It was all she had, and Jesus commented publicly that it was worth more than anything given by the wealthy. They, in fact, gave what they didn't need, some of their surplus, but she had given everything she had, and that is the giving that God values: the giving without self-interest, in solidarity of the heart, not the wealth and power that this treasury parade was all about.

We all know the story of the widow's mite, and we understand it as it is meant to be understood: that God values not the size of our giving, but the heart's depth of commitment in which we give. What we miss, however, is its placing: that it comes right at the end of Jesus' teaching, as its crowning statement: what remains after this is only a final description of what will happen when that teaching is refused – as it is being refused.

Placed as it is, the "widow's mite" is not just the occasion for a simple moral observation or a purely religious instruction. It concludes a series of teachings in the temple which Luke had received from Mark and which both have presented as Jesus' challenge to his society, its civic, political, economic and religious leadership and the way they conducted the business of the nation Israel. It concludes that teaching on a note that, especially for Luke's gospel, is just right, bringing together the great and the small, the public and the individual, the national interest and the generosity of the human heart. Here Jesus is talking about the simple faith and commitment of a poor woman, and he is talking about the mechanisms by which wealth and power are transferred from the people to their leaders. There is no room for any duality between sacred and secular, no room for a division between individual and national behavior. God values the generosity of a simple heart, and it is a challenge to the highest authorities in the land, if they have other priorities.

The teaching in Jerusalem has all taken place in the Temple, in the most public and revered of establishments and the centre of government, as far as Israel's own self-government was concerned. I hope we will not any longer imagine that the sacredness of the temple excluded the economic and political management of the nation. Only those matters which the Romans reserved for the governor would have been excluded, and even those, as we shall see, would be broached by the temple authorities, when they met to decide what way they would push the governor.

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Jesus had come to the temple, the supreme public place in Israel, and had laid claim to it as the place for him to teach God's revolutionary plan for his people. It was his Father's house, and his Father was about to shake Israel to the foundations. He had driven out the traders who were making a bazaar of the outer court (a decline in income, we can be sure, for those in charge of the temple) and he had disparaged the splendid public giving on which the authorities depended. He had exposed their weakness and inconsistency and eluded their attempts to discredit him. Only one area of agreement was found, on the subject of the resurrection, and that was an area where the priests were out of step with others on their side. He had accepted acclaim as the Son of David and raised, however ambiguously, the dangerous question of what that might mean.

If we have not understood that Jesus was confronting his society, his people and their leaders on the grounds and in the place where their greatest power and interest lay, we have not understood the gospel. If we imagine that his message did not concern the "secular" world, we have not heard his message nor recognised the world in which he spoke it. If we create a world and label it such that it stands outside the interest of God and the remit of Jesus, then we have created a world of our own imagining only.

For a long time we have been reading the gospel badly. Because Jesus spoke only of the coming rule of God, we have told ourselves that he has nothing to say to those areas of social and national activity which are outside the sphere of God's rule – as if anything could exist outside the sphere of God's rule. Because his message is never secular, we tell ourselves that he had nothing to say (beyond basic morality) to the "secular" world, as if anything like the secular world existed in his society; as if anything like a secular world exists anywhere, outside of our awkward attempts to correct some centuries of Christian mismanagement.

Jesus is confronting not theological opponents, to argue over interpretations of religious doctrine, but those whose wealth, status, and control over many areas of the law make them the leaders and rulers of society. He has been in trouble with them from the beginning, with his teaching in Galilee about the kingdom, but because they are his people (he too was circumcised and incorporated into their society) and they are the leaders, even the God-given leaders of his people, he had to make that journey to Jerusalem. The fire would not be lit until he confronted his people where they are a people, a nation, a whole society under God – in Jerusalem.

What happens now will be the result of that confrontation, and we should be very wary of loading into it any other theology, before we have interpreted and understood its meaning in the light of the events that finished this confrontation. The powers that governed Israel were about to strike.