

14 October, 2018

Surprising words and actions...more questions than answers

The man in Matthew's gospel was probably not just surprised but also shocked at Jesus' reply to his question; he has honoured the commandments but more is being asked of him – sell your possessions and give the money to the poor. But saying and doing things which shocked and surprised was a key feature of Jesus' ministry. He instructs a would-be disciple to follow him now and defy the Jewish tradition where a son gives his dead father a timely and honourable burial 'let the dead bury their own dead.' He orders another not to take the time to bid his family farewell before following Jesus. These sound harsh – I cannot believe that Jesus expects us to totally ignore our family responsibilities - but is Jesus saying that there is a danger of being so obsessed with family matters that we ignore his call?

Jesus healed on the Sabbath – a day traditionally declared a day of rest. But Jesus declared that the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and that to do good on the Sabbath is surely right. He challenged traditions which got in the way of compassion and healing.

Jesus challenged the idea that some foods are unclean – after all what goes into the body passes through the body. It is evil intentions which come from the heart which defile us. Again a challenge to traditions which gloss over the real root of 'uncleanliness,'

He ate with tax collectors, people despised because of their corrupt practices- and when challenged said 'Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick do. I desire mercy. I have come to call sinners to repent.' A message that no one is beyond the love and mercy of God?

There came a point in his life where Jesus knew that the Scribes and Pharisees were seeking to build a case against him and destroy him. They brought a woman before him who had committed adultery and asked Jesus to comment on the law which condemned the woman to be stoned. His response – 'let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone.' His message – are you so perfect and without sin that you can judge and condemn others?

Jesus was tested when asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, challenging him to deny the authority of the Emperor. His answer – give to the Emperor that which is the Emperor's and to God the thing which are God's.' Jesus is not denying the status of the Emperor but makes it clear that there is a higher authority who must be acknowledged.

Some of the parables give a surprising message – the landowner who paid the full daily wage to all his labourers regardless of how many hours they had worked: A lesson in generosity?

The father who celebrates the humble and contrite return of the son who has squandered his inheritance: a lesson in compassion and forgiveness to someone who has done wrong and repented?

When Jesus was dining with friends a woman washed Jesus' feet with a costly ointment. Others present criticised her, saying that the ointment could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. Given Jesus' concern for the poor you would reasonably expect him to agree, but Jesus said that the woman had performed a good service for him (he knew his death was close) **but** he reminded people present that the poor would always be with them and that there would be many opportunities to help them.

In one of his teachings Jesus describes the day when the blessed will be separated from the cursed; those who gave him food, drink, clothing and friendship will be blessed; those who did not will be cursed. When asked when **he** was treated in these ways his surprising answer was 'whenever you helped or ignored anyone you helped or ignored me.' He is saying I am in everyone. This brings us back to the question of how we can use our resources to help others.

Towards the end of his life, Jesus told his disciples of the fate ahead of him. Peter was horrified, begging that God should forbid it. Jesus' response must have shocked and even hurt Peter – 'get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Jesus had accepted the path before him. And at his trial it is perhaps surprising that Jesus says nothing to defend himself. When asked 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered 'You say so.' When asked 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' He remained silent. Again he has accepted the path before him.

On that Friday Jesus was crucified; and on the following Sunday came the greatest surprise of all.

Judith Adam