

Year A

Matthew 22:34-46

A friend once asked Isidor I. Rabi, a Nobel prize winner in science, how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but she always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?"

"Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist."

The Gospel text today centres around the asking and the answering of two good sets of questions. Jesus had just come into Jerusalem, greeted with wild enthusiasm by the crowds

who had clearly expressed their belief that here was their Messiah arriving at last. The stakes were now very high. Jesus was arriving at the point when a full confrontation with the Jewish authorities was inevitable. He had gone to the Temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and in doing so had made a claim over authority in the Temple. The Sadducees, the Temple authorities, had sent a delegation to question and entrap him. They had failed and so it now fell to the Pharisees, the other dominant group in Judaism to rise to the challenge and deal with Jesus of Nazareth.

One of them, a lawyer, came to confront Jesus on the Monday of what Christians would come

to know as Holy Week. The lawyer asked a good question. ‘What is the greatest commandment?’ We don’t know his strategy in asking the question. We don’t even know his motivation for sure either. But it was a good solid opener which would reveal exactly what was at the heart of the theology of Jesus of Nazareth. And he received a good, solid answer to his question - to love the Lord your God with all that you have and then a close second, to love your neighbour as yourself. All of this had the feel of a good old theological sparring contest about it. A bit like what theological students get up to on coffee breaks at seminary! ‘Let’s see if we can entice someone

to make an heretical statement.’ But remember the stakes were a good deal higher here. Jesus well knew that there was no easy escape from what was coming to him. He knew that the authorities were not going to tolerate him any longer. His time would soon be up. So it was very important to him that he did not waste the time and opportunity that he had to now fully declare his hand. Remember the words that the disciples had heard from the thunder of the transfiguration. “This is my son... listen to him!” Well, now was the time when all *would* listen and react. So Jesus asked his own set of related questions in return. These questions were asked so as to lead the

Pharisees to the point when they would know exactly what Jesus thought of himself without Jesus explicitly stating it. Every theological student who is training for the ministry of Word and Sacrament will know about the terrors of the sermon class. This class would take place once a week on Mondays a couple of hours before lunch. Every student would preach at least twice a year in front of all the academic staff and their student peers. At the end of the sermon anyone could ask a question of the preacher and following a bit of to-ing and fro-ing the principal would then deliver his verdict. It was brutally honest and sometimes very difficult to take but it was necessary and

hopefully in the long run helpful. The principal had been teaching his pupils good technique and he wanted to see evidence of that technique at sermon class. He used to say to us if you can't get your point across in twenty minutes don't even bother trying. Furthermore if the listener could not articulate in one short sentence what the sermon was about after listening for twenty minutes then you have failed. Also you must not cheat by ever stating that short sentence in your sermon. The sentence should be obvious to a keen listener. All very good advice but very difficult to achieve. But that's exactly what Jesus was aiming at here: without explicitly stating the

fact, he led his challengers to understand his claim to be the Lord, the Messiah, the son of God. Jesus assumed that David was the author of Psalm 110 which he quoted. That assumption would have been shared by the Pharisees. No one was going to argue with him on that point. Psalm 110:1 is among the most frequently quoted texts in the New Testament. The early Church clearly understood this text as offering a clear insight into the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. However no surviving Jewish texts from antiquity read Psalm 110 as a messianic prophecy. It seems that Jesus was challenging his critics to understand this particular part of their heritage in a new way.

In their consideration of that it would be come abundantly clear that Jesus was equating himself with the Messiah, the son of God, the Lord himself.

In a 1983 Gallup poll Americans were asked "who do you think Jesus is?" I could find no similar poll in the latter part of the twentieth century for the United Kingdom. People would never be polled on that kind of question in our country these days. Scotland is one of the most secularised countries in the world and certainly the most secular of the home nations of the UK. But anyway, in the United States of America, 70% of those interviewed said Jesus was not just another man. 42% stated Jesus was God among

men. 27% felt Jesus was only human but divinely called. 9% stated Jesus was divine because he embodied the best of humanity. Also, 81% of Americans considered themselves to be Christians. There's a lot of confusion out there isn't there? Maybe that's to be expected. But you know when the Pharisees left Jesus' presence they didn't dare ask him any more questions because they didn't need to. They knew exactly what claims he was making about himself and they knew exactly, therefore, what punishment was coming his way. There was no confusion of purpose with Jesus. He was able to articulate meaning without having to

explicitly state it. The problem his followers would have is somewhat different.

In his early years, American landscape photographer Ansel Adams studied piano and showed some talent. At one party, however, as Adams played Chopin's F Major Nocturne he recalled that "In some strange way my right hand started off in F-sharp major while my left hand behaved well in F-major. I could not bring them together. I went through the entire nocturne with the hands separated by a half-step." The next day a fellow guest gave Adams a no-nonsense review of his performance: "You never missed a wrong note!"¹

¹ Daily Walk, May 14, 1992.

Our Lord, our Master Jesus sounded loud and clear. We tend to sound at odds with ourselves; there's often as much noise as music and people struggle to hear. At the beginning of Holy Week through the noisy cheering of the crowds the clear voice of Jesus emerged. What were they going to do with him? No-one would have to wait long to find out.

Let's ensure that our witness is clear. That nothing else gets in the way because people need to hear clearly.