

Followers of the Way

What would Jesus do?

Lynda Rose, 15-02-26

Mt 5: 38-42; Mark 11: 12-21

This question was recently put to me by someone who clearly disapproved of my response to various social issues, in particular illegal immigration, but also the whole gamut of trans and gender issues, same sex marriage etc. The implication was that I was an unreasoning and 'unChristian' bigot. After all, Jesus said we shouldn't judge others and that we should forgive: *'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged ...'* (Mt 7: 1-2). And in the reading we've just heard, as well as numerous other places, of course, Jesus tells us to love everyone and not resist violence, to welcome the stranger and the outcast, to give to those in need, and not resist those who would take our possessions, 'if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well' (Mt5:40).

Seems pretty unequivocal, put like that, doesn't it? Jesus commanded us to love, accept, and welcome all, without judgment – to become in fact what the more robust might be tempted to call spiritual doormats! But is that really what Jesus meant? After all, this same Jesus cursed the fig tree when He couldn't find any fruit on it, then violently threw the money changers out of the temple, and elsewhere He told the disciples, *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"* Mt 10:34. And at the crucifixion, of course, He went head-to-head with the devil on the Cross. If He really was just the wishy-washy liberal some try and make him out to be, why didn't He say all along to Satan, 'It's okay, that's your truth ... not for me to judge. It's fine!'

Let us be clear, Jesus had absolute and unconditional love for sinners – that's you and me – but He rejected sin 100%. Truth was and is absolute, it's not relative, and a little bit of sin never has been alright. From Genesis right through to Revelation, that's been the position of Scripture. Take a look, for instance, at the woman taken in adultery in John 8:11. The Jews took a pretty dim view of adultery, of course. It was a property violation, and Mosaic law was clear. Deuteronomy 22:22, *'If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So shall you purge the evil from Israel.'* Actually, in practice, by this date, it was pretty unusual for that penalty to be imposed, because the Romans would allow the Sanhedrin to impose the death penalty only in certain, very specific circumstances – think of Jesus being taken before Pilate for sentencing. In the grand scheme of things, adultery wasn't that serious, so stoning to death would have been a pretty rare occurrence by the time of Jesus, and it's far more likely that the husband would simply have divorced her, and that she'd then have been forced to live by prostitution. But in the story in John, the scribes and Pharisees are pushing for strict enforcement of the law, and the crowd that's gathered to hear Jesus teach seems pretty supportive. That's what the law says – no way out of this!

But Jesus did the completely unexpected. He stared down at the ground, writing in the dust with his finger – clearly debating what to do. And then He said the unthinkable, *'Let*

anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (v.7). Wow! That's an incredibly clever answer, isn't it, and I think it sums up Jesus' whole approach. He upheld the law 100%, but at the same time He showed both understanding of the human condition, and mercy. '... let the one without sin cast the first stone.' Then, when there's no one left, He doesn't just say, 'Close shave that one! Off you go then!' He says to the woman, '... neither do I condemn you.' But then tellingly, he adds, '*Go and sin no more*'.

At no point did Jesus ever say that what the woman had done was alright, and that 'sin' was okay. So ... back to the money-changers. Exactly why did Jesus, so uncharacteristically, throw them out of the temple? After all, this was an accepted part of temple life – as much as anything else, people needed to buy the animals and birds required for sacrifice, and there were a lot of foreign Jews around, with 'foreign money'. So it was entirely reasonable for there to be people around who could change the currency. What was the big deal? This was just a necessary and normal part of everyday life.

But Jesus didn't see it that way – and imagine it for a moment, if you can. Stacked boxes of doves, sheep, oxen, the paving maybe covered with excrement, the tables of the moneychangers, with their locked boxes of cash ... people shouting over the crowds, as well as the noise of the animals. A typical market, in fact ... but this shouldn't have been happening in the temple. It was a desecration of God's dwelling place. And it was because of this that Jesus violently overturned the tables and threw them all out, shouting, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a House of Prayer for all nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'

I'll bet the temple authorities loved this! In their view, this kind of commerce in the outer courts was fine. Better than fine, in fact, because it helped the smooth functioning and financial upkeep of the temple, and what right did this upstart have to say they were violating God's command?

Was Jesus acting out of character? After all, He'd never been violent before, so what was going on here? I suspect the reason was that Jesus knew His time now was short, He knew he was about to be handed over for crucifixion. He'd been warning the disciples about it for ages (e.g Mark 9: 31, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise again'). And He knew that, despite His call to repentance, and all the miraculous signs, wonders and healings, people still weren't taking 'sin' – or God – seriously. So this was an object lesson. He was showing them what 'sin' was – which included things they just accepted as normal. And He was putting them on warning. 'You can't treat God like this. If you do, you'll be damned'. This wasn't the random, out-of-control act of someone who was a bit jittery and over-reacting, because He knew He was about to be crucified. This was the strongest call to repentance He ever made, by someone who knew the time was short!

Similarly, what appears to be His incomprehensible cursing of the fig tree, because it wasn't bearing fruit – that's weird, but this was an object lesson. In Mark it becomes a lesson in faith, v. 22, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and if you do not doubt in your heart ... it will be done for you.' But I think there's a deeper message here, and Jesus was surely saying, 'Make

sure you're bearing fruit when I come, or you'll be destroyed.' These two stories go together, and we should take their message very seriously.

So what would Jesus do, faced with the attitudes and conditions we face today? How would He react, for example, to same sex marriage, gender change, abortion ... assisted suicide? All these things are expressly prohibited in the Bible, but today we say that mankind has grown up, so the restrictions don't apply. Science has set us free! But that's not how God views things. Of course, we say, we can buy and sell in the temple courts! But Jesus said, No, you can't, you're dishonouring God, and so he drove the money-changers and merchants out. In the same way He's saying today, 'No, you can't change biological sex; you can't destroy the unborn because you decide the time isn't right to have a child; you can't redefine marriage ...'

And what would Jesus say to the claims of Islam that there is only one god, Allah, and that Mohammed is his prophet? John 14:6, Christ said, '*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*' Both these things can't be true, so what should we say and do when our faith is challenged like this, and when organs of government actively seem to prioritise Islam, because they're frightened of causing offence and being labelled racist?

In our so-called multi-cultural, multi-faith society, it may make life easier to go along with the crowd – to accept Halal meat in our supermarkets, to celebrate Ramadan and Eid alongside Christmas and Easter, and even invite our Muslim neighbours round for an Iftar, the fast-breaking meal served at sunset during Ramadan. But, from the evidence of the Bible, this isn't what Jesus would do. He would, without any shadow of doubt, love those who hold and promote these ideas, but He would be adamant that they are dishonouring to God and sinning – and that should be our approach too.

Jesus knew far better than us the reality of the war between God and the devil. He knew that we were under bondage, and He came to set us free, that we might be restored to that relationship with God for which we had been created. Ahead of Christ's return, that battle still rages today – and in fact in recent years the war has grown more intense, because the devil knows that the time for Christ's return draws near. The time of dispensation, when men and women still have the chance to reject sin and turn to Christ, accepting His offer of life, is drawing to a close. For better or worse, we are a part of that battle – we're God's army here on earth, and our mission is to rescue those who can still be saved, ahead of the final battle, when it will all become too late.

What would Jesus do? He would love the sinners, but speak out against sin, and nothing would be able to silence Him. "*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword*" Mt 10:34. If we fail to follow His example and speak out, then those who are in darkness will never have a chance of knowing the truth, and they'll be lost. Our call is to stand and denounce evil whenever and wherever it rears its head. Fearlessly. Knowing that our King comes.

Let us not be like the fig tree, that seemingly had everything going for it, but, when Jesus looked, had no fruit, and so became cursed.