

Did you know that there is a novel, (which I can't say I've read), called *The Interrogative Mood*, by the author Padgett Powell, who's distinguishing feature is that every sentence is a question? That it's 190 pages shows you that questions work on a number of levels and in a number of ways, doesn't it? I wonder if, when you think about it, just the fact of a question is interesting, and unwrapping it, unpacking it, is one of the skills of life? As an example of this, have you spotted that, when you ask me a question, I make it a point to try simply to answer the question I'm asked, and not to go outside the boundaries of the question itself, however tempting that might be? It's tempting because it's true, isn't it, that a question you are asked can reveal so much about the questioner? Why do they want to know? What's so important about that subject? How tempting is it not to answer the question but to come back with another one, like 'Why do you ask?' And have you realised that the last nine sentences themselves have all been questions?

Enough of that grammatical playfulness. But I've made the point that questions are vital to life, and how we ask and how we answer reveal much about the way we relate, what we think is important and how we live our life. A housegroup or Bible study group could have a really valuable time looking at all the questions which Jesus is asked in the Gospels, and how he deals with them.

I say 'deals' with them because much of the time he doesn't answer the question in the terms that his questioners might have wanted. Jesus is brilliant at spotting when a direct answer to a question will suck him into a discussion, or a world view, which is restrictive and ungodly.

I said that I try, wherever possible, to take any question I'm asked at face value and on its merits, and answer it within the limits of the question itself. But there are limits! Some of the questioners in political programmes ask their questions in such a way that the politician will be damned whichever way if they answer it directly. This week someone asked me a question which, quite simply, dignified what was a repellent subject, and to answer it in any terms at all would have made me complicit in something which I had no desire to be. So I replied in those terms. Sometimes joining in a debate shrinks you to the size of that debate, and some answers to questions are best done by rebounding the question back and reframing the debate. Jesus does this all the time, and lifts people's eyes to a new horizon when he does. Think of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is asked to clarify who our neighbours are. His answer asks us to consider who we are a neighbour to. He reframes the debate.

And that's what he does here, in John 10. 22 – 30. I don't think the question is a hostile one, unlike many he is asked. There is a genuine buzz around Jesus, and the people who come to see him really want to know more. But their question reveals a worldview which Jesus wants to rise above.

The context is critical. It's a religious festival, the Dedication Festival. (there's another series of Bible studies you could do about what Jesus does at different festivals and why, but that's another sermon too). You might be more familiar with the Dedication Festival as being called 'Hannukah', the festival of lights, with the exciting 9 branched candlestand. It celebrated an event for a couple of centuries before, when the Temple had been desecrated under the Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes IV, and we retaken and restored by Judas Maccabeus. Read all about it in the Apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Each year the Jews celebrated the cleansing of the Temple, light being restored from the darkness, the re-establishing of their centre, their faith and their life. Their identity was bound up in this place. No wonder, when Jesus comes to the temple, that the people want to know whether he is God's chosen one, whether he, like Judas Maccabeus, will get rid of desecrating forces and an Emperor who is not God. Their identity is bound up with the place and their religious practices, and the occupying empire was compromising that. They looked for the one they called the Messiah, who would prove who he was by getting rid of the pagans, just as Judas Maccabeus had done.

So it's fine for them to ask whether he is the Messiah. And Jesus knows, I think, that it's a genuine question, but it's the wrong one. Jesus says, effectively: It's not about whether I am the Messiah, in your terms. The kingdom of God is not now to be seen in the operation of one godly society among many pagan or ungodly ones.

It's not simply about politics and land and empire. It's about whether you are in a relationship with the Father. And if you recognise me as being from the Father, then you will be in the relationship he intends for you. If you are looking only for the messiah then I am not the answer to your question. But if you are looking for the Father, so that you can be his children, then let's talk some more. And, if we'd carried on to verse 31, this incenses the crowd, and they try to stone him and arrest him.

What we believe about God will often be determined not by the questions we ask but by the answers we are expecting to receive. And it seems to me that God is always bigger than the answers to our questions. There is always more to learn, more to know, more to wrestle with. Perhaps, in these terms, it would have been helpful for Jesus to speak some more about how to deal with authorities who don't act as agents of God's justice. Do we resist, or submit? That's a key question on today, the Queen's birthday, and in a week where the nation has considered again the life and works of Margaret Thatcher. Do we resist or submit to those in authority?

But what Jesus says here is that the underlying question is about our true identity as children of God our heavenly father. And it's not about what God might do for us – the messiah recuing the nation – but about what we might do as God's children – revealing God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to a needy world. So, what will your questions be? What do you want God to do for you...or what can you do for God. Keep asking. Won't you?