



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

21st July, 2023

"By what authority?"

Matthew 21:23

There was a trend in UK -and no doubt elsewhere- of wearing plastic wristbands with a slogan of some sort, usually in support or awareness of some cause: it could be anything from a charity to your blood group! One often worn by Christian people bore the letters 'WWJD?', -it stood for 'What Would Jesus Do?'. It's a kind of nudge to the conscience in a world of temptations and forces; a call to think first and do right!

When we read the Gospels we find that '*What Jesus Did*' gives a moral guide that even some non-Christians want to follow. But Jesus also did and said all sorts of things that came as a surprise in the religious culture of his day, especially to the pious and self-righteous, who often judged him for them. It was usually to do with who he spoke to, touched, or associated with: outcasts, the 'low-lifers' of society, 'sinners', people with illnesses and disabilities which were considered (*wrongly of course*) to be the result of 'sin'. Such people were thought to be under a curse, unclean; they were stigmatised. Associating with them was itself regarded as a kind of deliberate self-contamination. So Jesus was criticised for hypocrisy, double standards, impurity... and worse.

I think Jesus made a distinction between the person and the problem. He wasn't *condoning anything* that was wrong, but he wasn't *condemning anyone* either. Jesus associated with outcasts and the afflicted and stigmatised because he loved and cared for them; he modelled a life of non-judgmental friendship whilst keeping personal purity, and by doing so he won many over to a new, forgiven and restored life and dignity. He loved the person, but would not have loved the thing that had clouded their life. His touch didn't just make people better, it made them feel loved and valued, perhaps for the first time, -and *clean*.

It's fascinating that when challenged to answer a specific question -usually about his "*authority to do such things*" (Matthew 21:23) Jesus hardly ever gave a straight answer; rather he would bat one back to test the real motives and agenda of the asker (Matthew 21:24-27). At other times he would merely say 'look around you for your answer' (Luke 7:18-23). Or he would divert the discussion onto the real issue, as he did with Nicodemus (John 3:1-3).

Our society today has its own condemners, judges and sceptics, its 'truth'-seekers and neo-Pharisees of many sorts, as well as its genuine seekers and needy folk. There is a challenge in western cultures also, where morality is increasingly self-based and relative. Truth -it has been said- is 'under threat' and prejudice is making unwelcome appearances. What would Jesus do? What can *we* do as his body on earth? To live the 'Jesus life' -a 'Kingdom of God' life- is to show attitudes which are the same as those of our master and Lord (Philippians 2:5) -to reach out hands of unconditional friendship, loving one another without prejudice and judgement, -in, but not of, the world. 'WWJD?' raises a question that concerns us all, a watchword to guard and guide in our complex and confusing days.