

Sermon on Sunday 3 October 2021, 8.00am

by Rev. Bill Church

Matthew 22.34-40

When you are faced with a moral or ethical dilemma, you are sometimes invited to ask yourself: "What would Jesus do?"

That is a good test, but remember that Jesus lived at a particular time in a particular place – that's what we call the Incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas.

And it is not a time or place which we inhabit.

The world Jesus lived in had its problems. The country was part of a distant and uncaring empire and run day-to-day by puppet kings and a compliant religious establishment, all three of which maintained their own armed forces.

Life was encompassed by complicated religious codes and rules.

Life was pretty parochial.

There was always the risk of hunger or starvation.

People were beset with illnesses which were not understood, and which were often incurable.

By contrast, our country is self-governing but subject to some forces which we cannot control – think of the recent increase in the price of natural gas.

There are periodic worries about the efficiency, or even trustworthiness, of those tasked with keeping the peace.

There is an unprecedented lack of commonly agreed religious or moral norms.

Technology allows us instantaneously to know, and worry about, events all over the world.

Overall there is enough food but it is not fairly shared and there is anxiety about whether it is wholesome or sustainable.

We have expectations of medicine, and of the NHS, which are often unrealistic.

So, faced with a moral or ethical dilemma, maybe we should ask instead of "What would Jesus do?" the question: "What would Jesus want us to do today?".

The Gospel gives us an answer in principle – Love God and Love your neighbour.

That is a start, but how to get to the finishing line?

Now, when we drive a car we have a comprehensive Highway Code and an exhaustive (and exhausting) user's handbook for the car.

There is not the same for the Christian life. So we have to use... scripture, some guidance from the Church, the thoughts of wise men and women over the centuries, the advice of perceptive friends, prayer and our informed consciences. And then apply what we learn, not just to obvious cases – how we deal with our families and partners and with those at work and in the congregation and in the neighbourhood – but also, how we spend our time; how we get, earn, spend or invest our money, how what we buy benefits or harms our community and the wider world, how we handle daily interactions.

The Book of Proverbs does not contain the verse: "Better a slow and wise email reply than a quick and foolish riposte," but it ought to.

In other words, in all we do and say, we should ask first: "What would Jesus want us to do now?"