Some people are really great at numbers.
Mariette is one of them.

I am not. Just ask Mariette.

Some person who is great at numbers
has trawled through Scripture and discovered
that in the four gospels, Jesus is asked 183 questions.

Interesting in and of itself but not, I would suggest,
in any way helpful for our faith.
Until you put the other numbers alongside it.
Depending on how you define a “direct answer”
Jesus only answers between 3 and 8 out of 183.
By contrast, Jesus **asks** 307 different questions.
Asked 183. Answered 8. Asks 307.
That tells us that he is almost 40 times more likely
to **ask** a question than **answer** one.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In doing this he is changing the direction of the conversation.

In this and every other case, he pivots the focus to
something more substantial,
and deepens the conversation.

This morning’s reading is a case in point. Some context is helpful. Always.

“Jesus has just entered Jerusalem,
greeted and hailed by the crowds with the messianic title,
“Son of David.”

His first action after such acclamation
is to drive out the money changers;
those, that is, that are essential to doing the business of the Temple,
thereby threatening the revenue the Temple generates
for both the religious ruling class and occupying Roman forces.

“He then retreats to Bethany for the night.
The next day, after a somewhat strange interlude with a fig tree,
he returns to the scene of the crime
(from the perspective of his adversaries, at least)
and is met with this challenge to this authority,
a challenge leveled by, no surprise,
those most affected by the disruption of Temple revenue,
the chief priests and elders of the people.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is a question about authority and jurisdiction. It’s also a trap.
They are hoping to get him to say something that is blasphemous.

But if they think our boy Jesus is going to fall for something so obvious, they are wrong. He proceeds to do what he does best:
makes his answer contingent on theirs.
He answers their question with a question.

“His response reveals a political acumen
we sometimes forget to attribute to Jesus,
as he renders his opponents mute with a single, clever,
and politically fraught question.”

Jesus knows that they cannot answer the question about
John the Baptist without getting themselves into hot water
with the crowd.

We know that too, because the Gospel writer
has conveniently included their muttering under their breath.

So they answer, “we do not know”

On the basis of that, Jesus refuses to answer their
original question about jurisdiction, and instead
“He then tells a parable justifying, or at least illustrating,
the overturning of expectations and reversal of fortunes
he both announced and inaugurates.

The two sons in the vineyard.

I angsted over this text.
Probably because it doesn’t follow the usual pattern of a parable. There is no sucker punch at the end
which turns what you think you know upside down.
It is really an illustration.

It does what it says on the tin.

Douglas Webster writes,

“The [story] poses a question:
*Which is better, a yes-out-of-a-no or a no-out-of-a-yes?*The emphatic no that turns to a positive yes
is better than the enthusiastic yes that turns to a passive no.
The outward “yes” that really meant “no”
is a thinly veiled description of the scribes and Pharisees;
whereas the outward “no” that becomes a true “yes”
is another way of saying, the last will be first and the first last.
The [story] is a sober warning against anyone
who says “yes” to the tenets of the Faith,
but hardly lifts a finger for Jesus’ Kingdom work.
Their initial, enthusiastic “yes” to God
is in danger of becoming a non-committal, passive “no.””[[3]](#footnote-3)

In offering this story, Jesus is asking taking the Chief Priests’
question of authority, and moving it far beyond jurisdiction.

Relationship. Motivation. Response.

He is far more interested in the outcome than the look of the thing. And he is more than insinuating that the Chief Priests are more interested in the look of their religiosity.

“God pays attention not to roles, but to the heart and to our actions.”

David Lose helpfully offers this:

“The tax collectors and prostitutes – representing
the entirety of those typically considered beyond the pale –
enter the kingdom of God **ahead** of the rulers,
[but notice this] **not instead** of them.”

“[T]his final pronouncement is not ultimate condemnation,
let alone expulsion from the kingdom, but rather **reversal**. …
But while this precludes the rulers entering first,
as they may have expected – after all, they are the chief priests
and leaders of the people – they are not banished.

So even despite their shortcoming, there is still room for them.
Still room, that is, for those who have been corrupted by power;
room even for those who neglect their duties
or perhaps even exploit their stations;
room even for those who reject Christ’s words and deeds,
just as they rejected John [the Baptiser]’s.
Room, that is, for all.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This seems like a really good thing to notice right about now.

The divisions in our world seem intractable these days.

Heightened of course by 2020 – the year like no other –
but also heightened by election season, both here and overseas.

We live in “an increasingly polarized culture
and some of our [global and local] leaders thrive
by exploiting and encouraging that polarization,
yet Jesus seems here unwilling to give up on anybody.
Which feels important for us to remember when [we are]
tempted to consign others to the category of
despicable or unredeemable.”

In Jesus’ world the tax collectors and prostitutes
would have easily fit that definition.

Here he turns that definition on its head,
so that it now applies to the religious professionals
and even then there is room.

David Lose again,

“Even amid the height of Jesus’ struggle with his adversaries;
even in the last week of his life;
even as he faces betrayal, accusation, desertion, and crucifixion;
yet Jesus imagines more room in the kingdom of God
than anyone would imagine or have right to expect.
That, at this particular time, seems like awfully good news.”

However you count it.

PRAYERS

***Church***

Give thanks for the opportunity to be gathered in this place
and in Alfriston.

We pray for our parish as we take stock of the year that has been
and look to the future to which you call us.

We give thanks for the bridge tournament yesterday
for Pauline’s ministry to that group and to the church.

***World***

As this world continues to struggle with the devastating effects of COVID 19 we remember that those at the margins are disproportionately affected – in their health, and their financial security.

We pray for leaders of this world seeking to balance
health and the economy
and for all those working towards a vaccine.

We pray for the UK and Europe, facing a devastating third wave.

We pray for the US, where the divisions seem so stark.

We pray for the family of Breonna Taylor,
denied justice from her killing.

We give thanks for the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg,
and we pray for the justice system of that nation.

***Community***

We pray for our own nation as we draw closer to the election.

We pray for all those who are seeking office.

We pray for policy writers and communication teams, and we pray for the media.

As we prepare to vote
grant us access to good information.

May we take our faith with us into the polling booth.

***Those in Need***

We continue to pray for Bishop Jim, in critical condition
We give thanks for the medical professionals who are tending him.

We pray for Philippa and Jeanette, Sue and Monica.

We give thanks for the life of Matt Ratana, the police officer killed in the UK.

We pray for all those who are mourning the death of one they love, and those coming up against an anniversary.

In a time of silence we bring before you those things which please and concern us most.

1. #  Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered,* xviii-xix

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Lose, *In the Meantime* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Douglas Webster, *The Parables of Jesus: Friendly Subversive Speech,* 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Lose, *In the Meantime* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)