

Market Towns

In the time of Jesus, the buying and selling of produce and different kinds of goods was an important feature of life in each of the settlements. Towns and villages had market places where local people came to obtain food and supplies. Perhaps it sounds obvious, when we think about the daily lives of the people Jesus encountered, but the market would have been a central feature of Jesus's experience throughout his life. Certain sorts of goods were locally produced all over the lands Jesus passed through: cereals, wine, olives, olive-oil, and figs would be available daily. Other kinds of goods had to be brought in and traded. In Galilee, for example, salted fish was a particular tradable commodity. Another was bitumen from the Dead Sea, needed for caulking boats.

People were therefore connected by the market life and by trade. Going from town to town, Jesus would have encountered others travelling from place to place with their different goods and animals, a dangerous business if you took the wrong road or were in the wrong part of the country by yourself, as the parable of the Good Samaritan makes only too clear.



Jesus, in common with other itinerant holy men and prophets, also passed through the same towns and met the same people as the market traders. It is noticeable that he avoided the larger towns and cities which often had a greater proportion of gentiles. He brought his ministry to the Jewish people and like the traders he brought something to his people which they could not get elsewhere: a ministry of extraordinary teaching and healing. In small communities, word would quickly spread that Jesus was on his way and people would gather together to see him.

Yet Jesus was also aware that there were lines to be drawn. The incident of the traders in the temple is a case in point. Its importance is shown to us by the fact that the story appears in all four gospels. The traders and moneychangers had gone too far and the religious space had been taken over by greed and exploitation of the trade in sacrificial animals and in changing money for the temple tax. Jesus knew there should be room for both commerce and religion, but that there has to be respect and restraint in maintaining the integrity of both the market and the temple space. But that does not mean he was against trading and commerce. In fact in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, he paints a picture of God going into the market place and hiring workers to become his own in

his vineyard. So God does not want to supplant the marketplace culture, or wipe it out, but to work with it and out of it. The important point is that we should not forget that the spiritual belongs alongside the material and that although we must feed the body we must also feed the soul. The problem comes when human greed and human concern start to overrun the space and time we make for God. To overtake prayer space and to make money a barrier to those who desire to come before God is an affront to the way we should always keep balance in our lives and in our churches. It is a lesson we could well learn today.