

Sermon for Trinity 17 – Year A

The Gospel this morning, at least the final verses anyway, appears to be straight out of Vicar of Dibley – No, no, no, Yes and yes, yes, yes, No!

What's going on here. One son, after a negative response agrees to what his father asks, for help in the vineyard. The other having agreed to work then changes his mind. That sounds like someone who books a table at a restaurant then never shows up causing loss of earnings to the restaurant owner and the concern to the hospitality industry as a whole at the present time.

Ask for a show of hands: Who thinks it's more important to say the right thing; and who think it's more important to do the right thing? What if what you say is not the same as what you do? Many will be familiar with the word 'orthodoxy' which literally means 'right opinion' or 'belief'. A much less known word is 'orthopraxis', which means right action'.

Explain that Jesus is telling a story about two sons who don't do what they say. The priests and elders tried to catch Jesus out with a trick question, and he turned it around and asked them a trick question back! This story recounted by Matthew was his answer.

The Gospel passage is set in Jerusalem probably after he had ridden into the city on a donkey and been hailed by the crowd as their new king, sent by God. It is made clear though that he comes in peace not as a military leader. He has challenged the temple operations that helped to support the work of the offering of sacrifices as the law demanded, but which got in the way of the temple's true purpose as God's dwelling place, the place of prayer.

Jesus has prophesied and healed. Now He is questioned by the religious leaders about his right to behave in such a way, by what authority he had, this guy from Galilee! Jesus' behaviour is challenging their authority and challenging the status quo. By what authority are you doing these things? – they say. As ever he answers their questions with another question in true rabbinic teaching style. Jesus' question about John the Baptist puts them on the spot. Answer one way and they will be wrong and answer another way and that will be wrong too.

Having gained the upper hand Jesus makes it worse with the parable about the vineyard, which everyone knew represented Israel. Jesus makes it even worse by making the prostitutes and tax-collectors more righteous than the Pharisees, and claiming they did the will of the Father, over and above the religious leaders! When the priests ask who gives Jesus' authority, it appears to focus on the question of importance – was John the Baptist's ministry *of God*?

There are many competing voices advocating for our attention today, in politics, through the news and on social media. Influencers claim our attention because they're famous and seem important. Who do you listen to? Jesus' answer points to a different truth – the people we should listen to are those who practise what they preach and follow God with integrity and truth.

What is Matthew getting at in his Gospel when speaking about authority?

By what authority? they ask Jesus – if someone came into church and started to preach a different message you would rightly ask 'by what authority?'. Jenny, Hilary, Liz and myself have been authorised by the Church of England and licensed by the bishop as ministers of the Gospel. It is a huge privilege and a great responsibility. Jesus is saying are you questioning John the Baptist?

In the passage from Ezekial the prophet encourages the people to 'repent' or turn away from' implying they should change their minds and their actions. In the Gospel story Jesus told both sons 'change their minds' and subsequently do the opposite of what they had previously said they would. The important thing is not which one SAID the right thing in the first place, but which ultimately DID the right thing – turning back to God

So what is the takeaway this morning? Well, first off, we can as Christians can change our minds. Over my life I've changed my mind on various matters work decisions, love life, and the life of faith. After I was confirmed through my secondary school, I didn't quite turn my back on the church, but I wanted to know what other faiths offered and how did that relate to Christianity. Later I (and my wife as well) had to learn about matters of gender in relation to God, a loving Father. And when I was training to be a Reader I learnt to value the OT for its own sake.

Perhaps the challenge of the Gospel passage for us is partly this – to make sure we are responding to Jesus, allowing him to confront us at any point where like the second son and said “Yes” to God while in fact going off in the opposite direction. That’s important. But what should we his followers do today that would challenge the powers of the present world with the news that he is indeed its rightful Lord? What should we be doing that would make people ask, “by what right (authority) are you doing that?” to which the proper answer would be to tell, not riddles about John the Baptist, but about Jesus himself?

From my sermon to the people at St Mary’s, Farleigh, last Sunday:

We live in a time when many think that God’s grace extends to only a few. That they have special privileges. But God’s grace extends to all, and I underline the word ALL. Whether that’s ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, residential status, etc, etc. As St Paul said we are all one in Christ Jesus. One of the hardest things to swallow about the nature of grace is that means God can and will show mercy to our enemies which poor old Jonah had to learn the hard way!

Sorry folks, no pleading Special privileges – Christian Nationalism – no. Grace is a gift. In all this Jesus is speaking to his disciples. Matthew one of the disciples is speaking to the early church, and the early church is speaking to us today.

Who do we listen to?

Amen