

Sunday Between 25<sup>th</sup> September and 1<sup>st</sup> October [26]

Matthew 21:23-32

Our gospel reading this week is a lesson in 2 parts, both important, both linked but also quite separate. The first lesson comes from Jesus' response to the chief priests who challenged his authority. Jesus answered a question with a question, and it seems a reasonable question on the surface. He will speak of his authority if the chief priests will describe their understanding of the authority John the Baptist held for his preaching ministry. We are told of the difficulty this question posed to the leaders of the temple. If they are God's priests and they say John was authorised as a prophet of God then Jesus will condemn them for not also listening to John, they could see clearly their own hypocrisy in this. However, they also knew that the people they led were overwhelmingly supportive of John's message of repentance and indeed those people would likely turn on leaders who outright denied that John had any authority to preach.

It is one of those impossible problems, a catch 22 situation. There is no answer which the chief priests can give that leaves them without risk of loss of reputation or status. Either way, a weakness is shown in their position and the authority of their own leadership is damaged. In the end the chief priests decide to opt for a 3<sup>rd</sup> way, to simply say they don't have an answer – leaving them frustrated because now Jesus won't answer their question either.

The issue here is not the answer that the chief priests gave, it is not that they got it wrong, but rather that their answer spoke to a lack of integrity in their position. They knew what they wanted to say, but feared the popular response, they knew what Jesus wanted to hear but recognised that they looked foolish if they admitted to that. The seemingly 3<sup>rd</sup> option was still one where they have damaged their reputation by being unable to hold a position at all. Reasoning out an understanding of our circumstances and our relationship with God is an integral part of Anglicanism. The three pillars of Anglicanism, scripture, tradition and reason, are fundamental to our whole approach to religion in this church. We adhere to scripture and honour tradition but we do both with reason in our understanding, we do not blindly follow.

Unsurprisingly, that leaves us with a church where many of its members disagree on many issues, but faith is not a destination, it is a journey – and a lifelong journey at that. Slavish adherence to a path without the ability to hear another point of view or perspective will, necessarily, lead us to the place where we see the chief priests in today's reading. Where reason is a part of our faith we can learn, evolve our position even change our mind completely on some issues without loss of integrity or weakening of faith. Where we cannot see how God can possibly work in ways we hadn't imagined, like the chief priests' experience, we will face questions we cannot answer that become not only confusing but also challenging, and when we are challenged it is all too easy to become defensive rather than open to hear the spirit in the midst of the confusion.

In the second part of the gospel reading, Jesus uses a parable to show just how upside down the world has become since he began to minister amongst the people. Those who had been eagerly awaiting a messiah, those bound up in the religious institutions, those who proclaimed themselves as God's leaders for the people were

all unable to recognise Jesus for who he was. So convinced, were they, of how God would intervene in the world they simply watched as God's son walked amongst them. Not only did they fail to follow Jesus, they actively worked against him, viewing this man as a threat to the status quo. In all of their biblical scholarship, their prayerful worship and their reflections on the nature of God, none had been able to imagine that this Jesus was authorised by God to minister in the world.

The sons in the parable represent those who profess to love the father and those who seem to be rebellious. The Jewish leaders are like the son who says all of the right things to the father but in the end does not do what has been asked of him, disobeying the father and doing his own thing. The followers of Jesus are like the son who, despite being pretty unreliable in encounters with the father, even saying no to a direct request, in the end does the right thing.

So we are offered 2 lessons to reflect upon. The first is a lesson in integrity, where we encouraged to hold a position with honesty and not be swayed by the popular voice or the avoidance of conflict when we know what we believe will not be what others want to hear from us. The second is a lesson in the freedom to change our mind and do the right thing even when we hadn't always done that. This second lesson speaks of integrity too, they both require the elevation of reason to a position of equal status in our reflections as the positions scripture and tradition hold. We must at once be confident to speak the truth of faith as we understand it and we open to changing what we understand that truth to look like in our encounters in the world. Being an Anglican comes with a particular challenge that is what, perhaps, sets us apart from some other Christian churches, we hold many things – seemingly unresolvable things – in tension. That will lead to disagreements, but we face those disagreements in love. Jesus called us not to accept the status quo, but to challenge it. Jesus' example of acceptance for all is one we must constantly rediscover if we are not going to fall into the same rut that the chief priests were in. When we can only see things one way, we miss so very much of the creative power of the spirit of God at work in the lives of so many around us, particularly those lives that look completely different from our own. May the spirit of God open our hearts and minds to see Christ at work and to be Christ to others.