

Matthew 21:23-32

Saying 'Yes' to God

By the time we get to this part of the Gospel, according to Matthew, Jesus has been creating something of a storm to say the least.. He has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding in on a donkey and being hailed by the crowds as the Son of David, the fulfilment of their hopes and prophecies and dreams, coming in the name of the God to usher in the new world order.

Then immediately after that, Jesus goes into the Temple and overturns the tables of the traders and claims that space back for God. He follows this with more healing miracles and then he curses a fig tree and causes it to wither.

Is it any wonder then, in the light of all this frenetic exhibition of power, that we read the opening words of our passage today in verse 23: “When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’”

Now there is no doubt that Jesus was a threat to the religious and social leaders of the day. He was exhibiting enormous and miraculous powers, the crowds were absolutely enthralled by him, his courage and boldness in confronting the powerful was astounding. Of course they would want to question his authority...After all, who tells who what to do and believe around this place? Why, the chief priests of course. They were in a spiritual lineage that went all the way back to Moses. The Scribes were the most learned theologians in Jewish society. The Elders had years of experience and had the unquestioning respect of the people.

Now Jesus clearly has no intention of getting caught in some abstract debate about whose authority is greater than whose. As he often does he responds to a question with one of his own. He decides to ask a really tricky question for them that will expose their hypocrisy. “Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’”

Now, this was a tough question for the religious leaders to answer, as Matthew rightly points out to us in verse 26 and 27, because no matter what they said, the answer was bound to upset someone. If they agreed that John the Baptist’s ministry came from God, then Jesus would say, “So why didn’t you listen to him and follow him?” But if they said that his ministry was not from God, then the crowds would have turned on them because they loved John the Baptist. There was no way they could win the argument against a question like that so,

as Matthew tells us in verse 27, the best answer they could come up with was: “We don’t know”.

So much for their spiritual authority! These religious leaders were unmasked for who they truly were. They claimed authority and power and privilege over the people. But their chief concern was to protect their power base, their standing in society and to protect their reputations. They didn’t give an answer because they didn’t want to lose what they had. Power before principle. And of course, in this encounter, we have a lesson for all politicians and religious leaders and vicars and all those who hold positions of authority in society today.

Spiritual and political leadership demands courage to do what is right - often at the expense of personal gain and popularity. But the leaders that Jesus was addressing were unable to recognise the authority of Jesus to challenge them in this way for the simple reason that he was acting out of a form of authority that they had never witnessed before. For them, authority came with a title, with respect in society, with wealth and prestige, with the ability to make decisions that the people would unquestioningly obey and with the weight of history on their side. But that was not the type of authority that Jesus was modelling to them as the authority of the Kingdom of God...

The authority of Jesus was of a completely different order altogether. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of sinners and prostitutes. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of little children. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of the outcasts and those on the margins. Ultimately, the authority of Jesus was worked out in a life of service, not ruling; a life hallmarked by betrayal and personal sacrifice, rejection, torture and a criminal’s death on the cross. That is where the authority of Jesus lay: not in some sort of power game that brought with it prestige and wealth and the respect of the people. And the religious leaders had never seen anything like that before and had no idea how to respond to it

The fact is their world will turn up-side down. Jesus’ authority will turn the world down-side up. And that down-side up authority has been fore-seen by the prophet Isaiah “ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

In Mary’s Magnificat in Luke’s gospel, she voices her feelings of wonderment and praise for the coming birth of the “little child” who will turn the world down-side up. ‘His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their

thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

The chief priests and elders will desperately attempt to hold onto their authority. As William Barclay puts it “This controversy story is the first of five challenges aimed at undermining Jesus’ authority. (Matthew 22.15-22; 22.23-33; 22.34-40; 22.41-46). When the elders and chief priests were unsuccessful through using words, they turned to violence.”

That violence, that death will not have the expected outcome; it will not maintain the old order of things. Jesus’ death will not maintain the power of the chief priests and elders. Their world, and that of the entire Jewish community, will be turned upside-down. This is what today’s epistle is all about.’ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” This is so **not** the order of the chief priests and Jewish leaders, the way of the world.

So it is with us. We are called to speak light and hope in a world of darkness and despair; compelled to sing as Job does “For I know that my Saviour lives” The Philippians text is considered to be an early hymn of the church. The statement, “Jesus Christ is Lord” is considered to be very first statement of faith. The One who emptied himself, who took on human form, who died a horrific death has been risen, and lives again. “He is the life that’ll will never, never die. He’ll live in you if you’ll live in him.” This is what Jesus offers to an upside down world. And it’s what we believe and proclaim and seek to live out here today.

Briefly a comment on the parable. The key words in this passage come in verse 29: “But later he changed his mind and went...” The phrase ‘changed his mind’. A more literal translation of the Greek would be to say: “Later he changed what he cared about and went...” And that is the key idea here. When the son said ‘No’ to his father, all he really cared about was his own comfort, his own way of living. But later, he changed what he cared about and chose instead to care for the honour of his father and then went out into the vineyard to work for him. As opposed to the other son of course

At the heart of this passage is a simple question: What do you care about? What do I care about? Are we like the religious leaders to whom Jesus is

talking, whose primary care is for social standing and personal reputation and the comforts that come with a lifestyle of privilege? Or is our primary concern to honour of our God who asks us to go out and work for him in the vineyard of his Kingdom? If our primary concern is for the honour of God, we will be called out of our comfort zone and we will need to undertake some work for him. But that is what he asks of us. The question is always before us. So is it No or Yes? As we take the bread in to our hands in a few minutes may we say amen, yes.