

“Who Goes First?!” – Mat 21:23-32 – Proper 21 – Sept 25, 2011

Well, our latest Bible Study is underway and we are busy peeling back the layers of what faithful people learned in Sunday School, and that process is not always a comfortable one. Indeed, for many people actually digging into the bible with an approach that is somewhat more serious than the usual simplistic “no problems here!” approach is a very disturbing exercise. Take for example the familiar phrase, “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Isn’t that the image most of us were taught in Sunday School, and an image we like to hold on to even now? A pastoral image of a kind and gentle man, children on his lap, smiling sweetly at the people gathered at his feet, talking in soft and reassuring tones. However, today’s story of challenge and controversy in Matthew’s gospel shows us a definitely and distinctly different picture of Jesus.

Jesus even reminded his closest followers that things were about to change, to be radically different when for the third time he told them about his coming death and resurrection. That dramatic revelation was in marked contrast with the otherwise jubilant noise of his entry into Jerusalem. The crowds in the city were in turmoil, some asking, “Who is this?”, and others proclaiming, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” Consistent with that proclamation, the first act that Jesus performed after entering Jerusalem was indeed a vintage prophet kind of thing, entering the temple and driving out those who were using the house of God as a bazaar. In an acting out of religious rage Jesus turned over tables and chairs, quoted scripture, and in general displayed the kind of wrath reminiscent of any good Old Testament prophet.

Surprisingly enough, there’s no record that this violent and scathing behaviour raised too many hackles – oh it probably got the money changers and dove sellers upset, but there’s no account of the religious poobahs getting upset over this kind of behaviour. What really twisted their robes, though, was what followed next: “The blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he healed them.” (21:14) The blind saw, the lame walked, and the children cried “Hosanna” in the temple in his honour. This was definitely not good from the perspective of the chief priests and elders – it was OK for Jesus to upset the commercial interests in the courtyard, after all a little extra religious fervour and pressure might be useful for raising the rents and franchise fees to the Temple. However, he had gone too far because now he was treading on their territory and they certainly weren’t going to put up with that kind of encroachment!

“What makes you think you can do this? Who gave you the authority to do these things?” the chief priests and elders confronted Jesus. Now we, who live as people of faith some two millennia after Jesus’ prediction of his death and resurrection came true, we kind of snicker gleefully, knowing the answer to those confrontational questions. It is difficult for us to put our faith knowledge aside, to hear the question asked as a legitimate challenge from the authorities to one who was upsetting their entire world.

But I think it is helpful if we can do just that – if we can understand why the uptight upright religious leaders were upset, and the reason for their challenges to Jesus. You would think that they would be delighted that Jesus was accomplishing good things by these miraculous healings. However, with praise coming even from the lips of children, it was clear to the authorities that this man was gaining authority from the crowds, and that was a very dangerous situation for those religious and political leaders. Prophets were tolerated as long as there was affirmation from the people of their prophetic call – but this man Jesus, displaying such prophetic power, and being affirmed so completely by the crowds, represented a danger to the system.

Jesus was smart enough not to answer their question directly. Can you imagine what would have happened if he had replied in this situation, “My authority comes from God!”? This would have given the leaders, the chief priests and the elders sufficient cause to have him arrested on the spot, stuffed away and silenced. Instead, in good rabbinical tradition Jesus tossed the issue back with another question, this time asking the leaders if they thought John’s baptism came from God, or from human origins, thus putting them into a huge dilemma. Caught between the rock of admitting the baptism was from God and thereby opening themselves up to the charge of not believing, and the hard place of claiming baptism was merely a human invention and thus angering the adoring crowds, the leaders could only mumble, “we do not know.” Now, treading on the toes of leaders, even or especially religious leaders, like that and putting them into the embarrassing position of having to admit not being in control, is a very dangerous activity. The self-righteous really, really do not like being exposed as or even made to look unrighteous.

It’s a good thing that we don’t have any self-righteous, puffed-up chief priests and poobahs in Christianity today, isn’t it? Well, it would be a good thing, except that sadly we do indeed have such people aplenty. Names surface like crates of tea tossed into a harbour, names of publicly righteous people holding photo-ops and press conferences, spewing vitriole and condemnation that borders on hate mongering – all done in Christian love, of course.

Also sadly I think we would admit that there are still many self-designated chief priests today, modern-day righteous poobahs who challenge those flipping pancakes and serving coffee with the same questions, “by what authority are you doing these good things?” There are still plenty who, while they shun the robes of the chief priests, are still afraid to walk with and talk with and touch and heal the swirling crowds, preferring instead to isolate themselves in islands of purity and challenge those who would offer practical love in Christ’s name. And just as the chief priests and the elders didn’t – couldn’t – answer Jesus’ probing question, they still make sure that questions are still not welcome in many parts of the church. As Bishop Spong asks, “why is it that the churches who profess to have all the answers don’t allow any questions?”

Jesus dismissed the questions of the puffed-up self-righteous, but he didn’t leave it there – he added a parable just in case those leaders, and the rest of us, missed his point. The parable was the one about the two sons asked by their father to work in the vineyard – one says, “no” but eventually does so; the other says, “sure”, but doesn’t. The point of that message is pretty clear, but even so Jesus dropped another shocker, declaring that “prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the kingdom ahead of you!” Who’s going first?! Yes, prostitutes and tax collectors ahead of religious leaders. That’s a pretty harsh challenge to make not only about, but directly into, the faces of the religious leaders right in the temple! It takes a lot of authority to tread on the toes of the religious like that!

Of course, we know the authority by which Jesus did those healing acts of compassion. We read in Scripture how the story turned out, how his three predictions of his own death would come to pass. We hear the testimonies that his promised rising again victorious over death came to pass, as did his promise of the comforter, the Holy Spirit to dwell with us and lead us into all truth. We believe that Jesus healed the blind and cured the lame filled with the authority of God. We hear Jesus say, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”

And that's the part that gives me encouragement and hope. Yes, there are individuals and even whole branches of the church that get their robes in a knot when they see others doing good in Christ's name. But that is because there are others doing good in Christ's name! There are multitudes of greatly faithful who enter the temple not to admire the organ pipes but to heal the blind, the lame, the depressed, the lonely, the hungry, the fearful, the destitute. There are untold legions of people citing the love of God in Christ as their motivation to offer their time to visit the sick, to bring food to the hungry – bread, pancakes, sausages, Food Bank donations, and more. There are countless faithful who echo Christ's call, "come unto me all you who are weary, trodden down, rejected, and I will give you rest." And if you don't believe me, believe the works themselves – look around here in this sanctuary, and see representatives of those legions of people who do these things honouring the authority of God in Christ.

This is the central message of what it's about – prostitutes and tax collectors are still going into the kingdom ahead of the modern-day Pharisees – go figure! Those who hear, and believe, and live the message of reconciliation are not only acceptable to God, they are more acceptable than those who would "teach and not follow, who would tie up heavy burdens and lay them on the shoulders of others, but not lift a finger to move them." Jesus had plenty more to say to those kinds of self-righteous faithful, and we will hear more of what he had to say over the next few weeks, but for the moment let us focus instead on the faithful who are actually doing the works of God, living out not just the rules of faith but the greatest commandment of loving God and loving others. Let us focus on, and rejoice in being included as, one more congregation moving to being a missional church, striving to hear the will of God and proclaiming the good news of redemption in Christ in both word and deeds, embracing not just the form of faith but the Spirit of faith, and indeed embracing those who need and want to hear a message of hope in a world that all too often, and for way too many, seems a very hopeless place. Let us continue to count ourselves with the prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners of all stripes who have heard, and believed, and proclaim Christ's message of acceptance into God's kingdom.

Thanks be to our Lord, Jesus Christ, who provides this gift of acceptance into the kingdom with the authority of God, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.