

### **“Go Figure” – Mat 21:23-32 – Proper 21 – Sept 25, 2005**

“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.

That is definitely not the Jesus we see in this story of challenge and controversy in Matthew’s gospel. We remember that Jesus not long ago told his closest followers for the third time about his coming death and resurrection, a jolting revelation that seemed to fade into the 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.”

The first act that Jesus performed in 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 trade fair. Turning over tables and chairs, quoting scripture, displaying the kind of wrath reminiscent of any good Old Testament prophet.

Surprising enough, this violent and scathing behaviour didn’t seem to raise too many hackles – 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 twisted their robes, though, was what followed. “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, but 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 the foretold events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, 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 religious poobahs 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, but 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 the 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, putting them into a huge dilemma. Caught between the rock of admitting the baptism was from God, opening themselves up to the charge of not believing, and the hard place of claiming it was merely a human invention, thus angering the adoring crowds, the leaders could only mutter, “we do not know.” “Go figure” was the essence of Jesus’ final reply to them, leaving them hanging. That’s not exactly what he said, but it captures the essence. Perhaps we could even hear him dismissing the challenge of the chief priests and elders with today’s “what-ever!”

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, unless you count people like Pat Robertson – the ultra-right-wing-nut who called for the assassination of Hugo Chavez, the democratically-elected leader of Venezuela. To be fair, Robertson did apologize, after two days of a media storm, during which everybody, even President Bush, distanced themselves from this paragon of Christian love.

No, there aren't any self-righteous puffed-up Christian leaders today, unless you count the good folks at Focus on the Family, lovingly spamming the world with literature and advice that borders on hate mongering, all done in Christian love, of course.

I guess if we stop to think, there are still lots of self-designated chief priests today, who will challenge those who are 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' question, questions are still not welcome in many parts of the church, especially among the self-righteous. 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 message is pretty clear, but even so Jesus added a counter challenge, declaring that "prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the kingdom ahead of you!" That's a pretty harsh challenge to make not only about, but directly into, the faces of the religious leaders right in the temple! You'd think that a person would need a great deal of authority to "yank the tiger's tail" like that – go figure!

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." The proof is in the doing – go figure!

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 who enter the temple not to admire the furnishings but to heal the blind, the lame, the depressed, the lonely, the hungry, the fearful, the destitute. There are untold legions of people claiming the authority of God in Christ who 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 a small fraction of those legions of people who do these things with 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.