

Sermon for Sunday 1 October 2023 – The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

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Ezekiel 18.1-4,25-32; Psalm 25.1-8; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

Matthew tells us that Jesus entered the Temple and was teaching, and the chief priests and the elders challenged him, 'By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority?' So if you were to ask Jesus the same question, I wonder what evidence would convince you? What would we look for to know that Jesus had the authority to teach and to minister?

Well, we can understand why the chief priests and the temple authorities are a bit concerned about it, because Jesus comes into the Temple courts in Jerusalem with no official training, with no qualifications. He wasn't appointed to any particular job in the Temple. And those who were officials in the Temple, the priests and the scribes, they were appointed and qualified and trained. They came from priestly families and Jesus did not. He was a carpenter from Nazareth. So we can understand, therefore, why they might have thought, what authority has he got to rock up here and start teaching, particularly as he seems to have attracted a very large crowd? So our concerns, if we imagine ourselves as members of the temple authorities, our concerns might be that Jesus is leading people astray.

What's he telling them? What's he teaching them? Is it the official story or is he telling them something that could be dangerous or misleading? Is he taking them away from the true faith? So we can understand that Temple authorities might have felt threatened, particularly as Jesus was probably attracting bigger audiences than they were. So maybe human envy comes into play as well. So if anybody can just turn up in the Temple and start preaching, it could be dangerous, it could lead to chaos, and it could become a threat to the authority of the Temple. So I guess those questions were going round in their minds when they asked Jesus this question; 'What authority have you got to teach here? Who gave it to you?'

So if we then imagine ourselves to be members of the crowd who were gathered around Jesus, what evidence would convince you that he had the authority to teach and minister in the Temple? I wonder what would convince us? I think we would be convinced by the words that he spoke. And does it look like these words are words that he believes? And do these words resonate with my own soul? Does he speak to me? Who's he teaching about? Am I feeling drawn to God? Am I being pointed to God? Or is the preacher just teaching out of his own ego for the sake of attracting a large audience? Maybe those questions would be in our minds, consciously or subconsciously.

A few days ago, I was walking along the street and there was a plaque on the wall at one of the buildings that I went past, and it said, 'Charles Wesley preached here'. And that reminded me of this gospel story today because when the Wesleys were preaching, they attracted enormous crowds. John and Charles

Wesley travelled all over the country preaching, often in the open air or in somebody's house, and wherever they went, huge crowds gathered to listen. And they did so because they heard spirit filled sermons about Christ Jesus. People would hear news about God that was good news, which made them feel that the Christian faith had something to offer to them, and the Wesley sermons were in stark contrast to the official sermons of the Church of England.

I once came across a book of official appointed, approved sermons that Church of England ministers were supposed to preach at the same time that the Wesleys were ministering. And if I were to tell you that one of them was about the dangers of alcohol drinking on a Saturday night, or the naughtiness of rioting against the magistrate, you would understand that your spirit may not soar on a Sunday morning when you listened to these approved sermons. But when you heard the Wesleys, you heard about God, you heard about the Holy Spirit, you heard about the ministry of Christ Jesus, and you knew that it was for you. And I think something of the same thing was going on when Jesus was teaching in the temple courts.

So in answer to the challenge, Jesus reminds the temple authorities about John the Baptist. Like Jesus, he had no official qualifications, he wasn't a member of the temple staff. But we're told in the Gospel of Mark that all the people of Jerusalem went out into the wilderness to hear John preach. And what they heard was John's message of repentance. And they confessed their sins. They were renewed and as a sign of their renewal, were baptised in the River Jordan. And Matthew's gospel tells us that among those who confessed and were baptised were Pharisees and Sadducees, the very people who are now questioning Jesus, by what authority are you doing this? So Jesus turns their question around. You remember that John the Baptist guy you went out to hear, the one who baptised you in the river? Where did his authority come from? Was he just an empty sham or evidently, was he ministering in the spirit of God? And of course, they can't answer because they've encountered in John's ministry the spirit at work for themselves.

The problem, I guess, now, is that John the Baptist was in the wilderness; Jesus is now in the temple, and Jesus is challenging the temple. He's there on purpose and he speaks about a vineyard. Well, the theme of a vineyard occurs regularly in the teaching of Jesus, because the people of Israel were the people of the vineyard and the religious authorities were supposed to tend that vineyard and produce good fruit. And if we were able to go back in time to the temple in Jerusalem, we would see that its courtyards were decorated with a vine. If you imagine a vine carved around the top of our pillars and grapes hanging off it. That carving was to remind the people that in the Temple they were the fruit of the vineyard, they were the people of God's vineyard to produce good fruit. And that fruit was meant to bring in all the people of the world to know Israel's God. The vine is God, the grapes are his people.

And the temple authorities are supposed to be the workers in the vineyard that cared for and nurtured the grapes and brought forth good fruit. So, having been challenged, Jesus goes on and tells his little parable about going into the vineyard. He tells a story about somebody who said, yes, I'll go and work in the vineyard, but then didn't bother to turn up. And that is the temple authorities in Jesus's teaching. Because the temple authorities have become more committed to law and order, protecting their privileged position

in making money, in looking after a grand institution. They've forgotten their calling to tend the grapes, to produce a good fruit in God's name, whereas those who say, we're not going, we're not going into the vineyard, but then subsequently do, are those to whom Jesus is speaking. They are the desperate, lonely crowd of sinners and outcasts, the tax collectors and prostitutes, as we heard in the story, the marginalised; people who feel excluded, the ones who feel unwanted in this grand institution of the Temple, those who feel unworthy before Israel's God.

But these are the ones who Jesus attracts to himself, the ones who are sitting around listening to what he has to say. And in Jesus they find they're welcome; they feel blessed, they feel renewed, they feel close to Israel's God. So, hearing that parable, temple authorities would have been extremely angry when they realised that it was about them.

And elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus contrasts himself with the temple authorities; 'I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me.' - the wine that we receive in the Eucharist, the fruit of the vine, the life giving sustenance that we receive from Christ Jesus, that enables us to minister and witness in the world. So we see in the story that God's concern is for the poor and the marginalised, the lost. A God who welcomes the sinner but does not condemn them, who raises us to new life, who doesn't leave us in the gutter. And therefore Jesus's ministry is totally different to the temple. What authority do you need? What looks God-like and what looks like a human institution protecting itself?

We heard from our first reading today a little parable in Ezekiel. He expresses it poetically - in the Temple, the experience is like eating sour grapes that set your teeth on edge. But in Jesus it's like drinking the very best of wine, overflowing with the abundance and the generosity of God.

St Paul was a Pharisee. He was a trained member of the religious elite and his ministry began in the persecution, the imprisonment and the execution of Christians. So he was like sour grapes, wasn't he? But he was transformed through his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road. And in the reading we heard from Philippians today, we probably heard words from an earlier Christian hymn, a bit like our hymn, 'At The Name Of Jesus, Every Knee Shall Bow'. And he describes what Christ is like and therefore what the church is called to be like in order to produce good fruit, to be sacrificial, to be humble, to lay aside self in the service of others, obedience to the call and direction of God; nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but humility and respect for others. All those things Paul recognised in the person of Christ. And a church with Christ's authority will be like him in serving and loving and ministering to others. And so St Paul urges the church, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it's God who's at work in you, enabling you to both will and work for his good pleasure.

I once knew a lady in church who came up for Holy Communion and she thought that the wine tasted so nice that she'd go round to the back of the queue and come round again. And she sometimes did that two or three times. And I kind of thought, well, that's quite wonderful, really, because what she was doing was rejoicing in the refreshment of Christ Jesus, wasn't she? She wasn't just taking a little bit, she was diving in and kind of having the full experience of the fruit of the ministry of Jesus.

And I guess, therefore, that we can do the same. We can receive fully from him, not just a little bit, but the full refreshment that he offers over and over again as we receive from him. In contrast to the worldly ways of the temple, the spiritual ways of Christ Jesus. And therein is his authority the love of Christ Jesus, the love of God, the love of neighbour as self. In Jesus name, Amen.