

PENTECOST 17A 27-09-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 17.1-7; Ps 78.1-4, 11-16; Philippians 2.1-13;

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus 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?' 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?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Have you ever had a conversation with someone that has taken such an unexpected turn that you were left shaking your head and wondering- how on earth did that happen?

Conversations with Jesus that we read about in the Bible are often like that. As one commentator has written- conversations with Jesus are dangerous.

The religious authorities approached Jesus in the Temple the day after he had overturned the tables of the money-changers and disrupted the business of Temple transactions. He had also healed people who were blind and lame; and he didn't stop children from crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" No wonder they wanted to know who he was and by whose authority he had done these things- it certainly wasn't by their authority.

If we put ourselves in the sandals of those priests and elders we might have some sympathy for them. They had the Temple running smoothly, obeying all the rules and laws, doing things the way they had always been done, when along came this nobody from a hick town up north causing chaos and disrupting worship and tradition. Who did he think he was? He didn't ask permission!

If we are honest, we might admit that we too like to maintain the status quo. How often do people in churches get upset when changes are introduced, when the furniture is moved, or when words in the liturgy are altered? You probably know people who have angrily left a parish because they didn't like some changes- I know I do.

So, these elders and priests asked Jesus to explain himself, saying, "Who told you to do these things? Who said it was OK?"

Jesus turned their questions back on them, asking who it was who authorised John's baptism of repentance.

This threw them into a tizz: they couldn't say it was God, because they hadn't believed John, and they couldn't say it WASN'T God, because everybody else had believed John. So they just said they didn't know. Jesus identified himself with John, declaring that both were authorised by God to do what they did. The elders were left with nowhere to go, but Jesus didn't let them off the hook and followed with the parable of the two sons.

Again, the elders were left with nowhere to go. Neither of the two sons was an example of righteousness, but at least the one who had said 'no' changed his mind and did the thing he was asked.

This little parable obviously pointed to them as being like the son who said 'yes' but didn't go and do the work. They were religious leaders who had said 'yes' to God, but Jesus made the point that they were disobeying God because they refused to believe that Jesus was sent by God.

The people referred to as tax collectors and prostitutes were like the son who said 'no' initially, but changed their hearts and minds to obeying God, believing John's call to baptism and repentance and following Jesus.

This challenge to the religious leaders is like the question Jesus asked of his disciples, and continues to ask of us: Who do YOU say I that am?

C S Lewis wrote in his book 'Mere Christianity':

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.

You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

In his letter to the church in Philippi Paul included the wonderful hymn to Jesus that we heard today. It speaks of Jesus emptying himself, being obedient to the point of death, so that at his name every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Paul was in no doubt as to who Jesus was. The Israelites wandering in the wilderness kept forgetting who God was; even though God had got them out of Egypt, taken them through the sea, and given them food, whenever the going got tough they started moaning and complaining. As we heard in the reading from Exodus today, poor old Moses was copping it again; and once again, God saved the day and performed a miracle.

These ancient stories remind us that we humans can be fickle and forgetful- happy to praise and worship God when things are going well but quick to complain when things aren't going the way we think they should.

When we have doubts and questions- as we do- Paul has advice for us.

He reminds us that God is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God's good pleasure. I remember when I was new to faith, lying in bed in the middle of the night wondering how I could be sure I really was a Christian. How could I be sure it was all true? More than that- how could I be sure that God accepted me?

As I anguished over this it suddenly occurred to me that my life had changed so much over the past year. I was going to church, reading the Bible and books about Christianity, praying- all things that had not previously been part of my life. I realised that I had not done this on my own, I could not have changed myself so much- it was God who was enabling me to want this new life and to live it.

I was ecstatically happy with this realisation- unlike C S Lewis, who wrote,

'In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.'

Last week's challenge was to consider whether, if being a Christian was illegal, there would be enough evidence to convict us. This week, let us ponder the parable of the two sons, asking ourselves: which one am I?

Do I say 'yes' but go my own way, or am I willing to change and to be changed by the One who invites me into the kingdom?

The Lord be with you.