

Matthew 21: 23-32

This is a very interesting passage of scripture. In our reading, Jesus is confronted by the chief priests and elders – and they question him (interrogate him) – they ask what authority he has to teach and offer guidance to the people.

“...by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority...”

I think this is a really interesting question – because the question challenges the authority of Jesus to speak, but asks nothing of the message itself (it doesn’t confirm or deny the truth of the message – what Jesus actually said to the people). In other words, the chief priests and the elders seem more concerned about his authority to speak (and possibly his challenge to their authority) - while saying nothing about the message itself (which is the whole purpose of their ministry – to teach and guide the people – to share the wisdom of God).

Of course, there’s nothing new in this – in the question or the challenge. In Matthew's Gospel, we see lots of people ask questions about Jesus – about his teaching and his authority. John the Baptist and Pilate both questioned Jesus about his ministry – his authority to teach and speak on God’s behalf. John asked Jesus if he was the one – the messiah for who he had waited (Mt 11:2-3). And, Pilate asked Jesus if he was the king of the Jews (was he a threat or a challenge to the Romans – Mt 27:11).

And yes, the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Sadducees, the chief priests and the elders all had their questions for Jesus as well – they asked why his disciples broke "the traditions of the elders" (Mt 15:1-2). They asked for signs or proof of his authority (in Mt 12 and Mt 16). They asked for clarification on his teachings concerning divorce (in chapter 19) – they questioned him about paying taxes (in chapter 22). They had questions about the resurrection and the role of the commandments. And, now they question his authority to speak.

The disciples had a lot of questions. They asked him to clarify who was the greatest disciple – “who is the greatest among us” (Mt 18). They asked what good deeds would earn them eternal life (in chapter 19). They questioned Jesus about signs concerning the end of the age (in chapter 24). And, two weeks ago, we heard Peter ask a question about forgiveness - "How often must I forgive?"

All of these questions seem to have something in common. With the exception of John the Baptist – all of the questions seem to be self-serving. Those who ask Jesus questions want to trap him, or impress him, or get something from him. And to every pointed question Jesus offers an equally pointed answer, which can help us understand something about the Kingdom of God – and the teachings of Christ the King - and the ministry of the faithful (those of us who live in the Kingdom of God).

Here in Matthew 21, Jesus responds to the question put to him with a question of his own (and a parable to make his point).

The parable sets up a comparison between two sons – both are called to work in the vineyard. One son promises that he will do what his father asks, but doesn't. The other son tells his father that he won't work, but eventually has a change of heart - and does what is asked of him.

For those who hear this parable (the chief priest, the elders, the disciples and perhaps us as well) the comparison calls us to ask the question, *Which am I?* Am I the son who presents himself as obedient – and then doesn't see it through (the one who talks a good game – the one who appears to be righteous, but then doesn't keep his promise). Or are we like the other son – the one who comes to a new understanding – the one who does eventually commit himself to his father's call – the "black sheep" who (in the end) does what is needed? Which am I? Which are you?

There is an accusation in the parable - some who claim to obey the Father and observe the requirements of the Law (like the chief priests and elders) actually fail. Is this who we are, as believers -- as clergy and teachers and carers and disciples? Today we ask - who am I?

There is also a reversal of expectations in the parable. Perhaps Jesus is talking about the virtue that can be carried by those who have failed to live in the right way – and then experience true grace and healing. (So, perhaps this is also a story about resurrection.) So, again we ask – where do we sit in this story - who are you?

Jesus doesn't call his followers to be perfect (thank God) – he calls them to be honest – and he calls them to commit – to give themselves to their calling. He calls the sick and the vulnerable – he calls tax collectors and the prostitutes – in the words of our reading. (He calls the lost sheep – the black sheep.)

In the end, he calls us to ask a simple question – who are you – and who do you want to be? Will you be the one who starts well but falls away - or will you be the one who comes to God for healing and wholeness – the one who comes for growth and change – the one who discovers new meaning and purpose in service.

We might not be chief priests or elders, accusing Jesus and excusing ourselves with our questions, but the reading can still speak to us.

I'm reminded of those wonderful words in Roman chapter 12 – which describe the heart and the soul of the true disciple (regardless of background or social standing). Paul writes "...let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers..."

Paul continues, but you get the point. In our reading, Jesus doesn't call the chief priests to be perfect, but he does call them to be honest about their motives – he invites them to take stock of their own shortcomings – rather than the shortcomings of others. He meets the self-serving question of the chief priests with a parable that ultimately calls us to question our motives – our heart's desire.

In the end, the reading is a challenge. It asks us how we will respond to the truth of the gospel - will we allow the grace of God to move within us – to change us – to liberate us - or not? Will we be the son who pretends obedience or the son who changes his mind – the one who grows in service and obedience.

May God give us the grace and courage to search within – to offer ourselves in service – as workers in the vineyard.

The Lord be with you.