

SERMON NOTES – 17th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Sunday 27/09/2020

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Matthew 21:23-32 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²³ Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?' ²⁴ Jesus replied, 'I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?' They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will ask, "Then why didn't you believe him?"' ²⁶ But if we say, "Of human origin" – we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.' ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.' Then he said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁸ 'What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'" ²⁹ "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ 'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go. ³¹ 'Which of the two did what his father wanted?' 'The first,' they answered. Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

SERMON

The opening of today's gospel clearly identifies the chief priests and the elders of the people as the audience to whom Jesus is addressing his message. This context will not change for several weeks now. So what is special about this audience?

Firstly, the chief priest and elders of the community are the religious and; given the intertwined nature of the relationship between the scriptures, ritual and social-cultural governance for the Jewish people; the most powerful leadership group.

Secondly, they have lost their focus on the loving nature of God's relationship with his people. Their hearts have become misguided and hardened so they no longer effectively lead the people toward God.

Their understanding of who could be saved had become narrowed and exclusive. In their minds, only people chosen from of old by God and who strictly adhered to the traditions were eligible for salvation. This view which guided their decisions etc was a view that isolated others from living lives growing in the knowledge of God and witness of the graces in their lives. These chief priest and elders of the community had forgotten the living law of God's love, they had stopped loving their neighbour they had stopped fulfilling their role of calling all people to conversion and renewed covenantal living.

In today's gospel we find Jesus, who has recently and with some fanfare entered Jerusalem, confronting this audience of chief priest and elders. Jesus is challenging their idea's regarding who can be saved. Jesus actions do nothing to win him any favour with his audience, rather they fuel the desire of these leaders to get rid of Jesus.

Importantly Jesus, I suspect aware of the antagonism his position causes his audience, does not shy away but rather he metaphorically ‘dig his heels in.’ Jesus remains completely faithful to his conviction, to his fathers will. Jesus is telling his audience that walking the talk is not enough, he adds a twist to this metaphor, saying that actually they must walk the walk in the journey to know God.

In today’s gospel Jesus specifically indicts the chief priests and elders by equating them with the second son who while agreeing too, does not do the fathers will.

What we see instead is the first son who having initially refused his father’s request, changes his mind and so complies with the will of the father.

Which son or daughter are we, or more precisely for each of us, we must ask, which am I?

I suspect that if we are honest in our reflection we are likely to find that the evidence of the way we live our lives, the decisions we make, the opinions we hold about all manner of things might indicate a less favourable answer.

Saying we are Christian, followers of God’s will is easy, being Christian is not.

This was a factor in the point Jesus was making to the chief priests and elders.

The point Jesus was making was that it is not simply the actual adherence to rules that influences the bonds of our relationship with God, but importantly, critically the intentionality that serves as the driver of our actions. Believing is not evident simply through the paying of lip service to God’s will, rather belief is evident when our lives our decisions are guided by the desire to do what is right especially when it cost us personally. I invite you to answer these three questions;

- Attending church is an activity but what drives the need?
- How does it impact on the person you are?
- The way you know God?

In reality we are all a bit like each of the sons referred to in the gospel. Sometimes we hear the fathers request and respond faithfully but at other times our actions fail to carry through what we hear, . . . and believe. The point Jesus is making is that even knowing our weakness God does not turn his back but instead still calls us to salvation. It is up to us how we respond. We are the ones who must believe in that great offer from God and we are the ones who, being intentional, must do our best to faithfully do Gods will. With this in mind I invite you to reflect again on the three questions above.

Our reading from Philippians gives us some hint as to how we can hear Jesus and respond faithfully. We are each individual and that has been my focus so far, but we are also the church, the living body of Christ on earth, and we through this kingdom perspective are called in the being of church to be “. . . of the same body, the same mind with the same love . . . united in heart.”

Jesus suffered brutality, and allowed himself to be killed for us. Jesus is the model of how we must love, for “he emptied himself . . . becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

We are called to not simply say we love others, but to display our love through our lives, through sacrifice for the sake of others. In this we walk the walk with Jesus.