

Trinity 16 (Proper 21)

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 27 September 2020.

Readings: Philippians 2 vv 1-13 and Matthew 21 vv 23-32

'Who do you think you are?' This is a question that is rarely friendly. Like the question asked of Jesus in today's gospel: 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

In the preceding verses, we read of Jesus entering the Temple in Jerusalem, where he drove out all who were selling and buying, and overturned the table of the money changers. Jesus cleansed the Temple. He then cursed the fig tree, which withered at once. The chief priests and the elders did not react well. Hence their question. In effect, 'Who are you? How dare you?'

Jesus does not answer their question. Instead, he asks them if the authority of John the Baptist's baptism was human or heavenly.

What did John's baptism have to do with Jesus' authority? John the Baptist proclaimed God's message in the wilderness, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'. Amongst the crowds that sought John's baptism were some religious leaders who were sternly condemned by John, who told them that they needed to 'bear fruit worthy of repentance'.

John had called them out, saying that even though they held the position of religious leaders, they were not obedient to God's way. Jesus reminds them of their hypocrisy. They did not want to accept or admit either that John's authority came from heaven, or that it was from humans. They did not dare to offend the people who had responded to John, so they said they did not know. Therefore, Jesus will not answer their question.

As he does so often, to make a point, Jesus tells a parable – that of the two sons. One did not want to go to work in his father's vineyard initially, but eventually he did. The other son said he would go to work, but he did not. When asked which son did what the father asked, the religious leaders have no problem identifying the first son, who did the will of the father.

Jesus is putting up a mirror for the chief priests and the elders, and makes it clear that their behaviour has not been good. They have not been willing to admit that they are wrong, whereas the tax collectors and prostitutes, the outcasts, are following Jesus and will enter the kingdom of God before these so-called religious men.

These religious leaders seem pious, faithful to the laws of their religion, but they are unwilling to face the new reality they see in Jesus. What made the tax collectors and prostitutes respond to Jesus, and what kept these religious leaders from doing the same, and accepting that the authority which is so evident in Jesus, and John before him, comes from God?

To use another of Jesus' pictures, it is always easier to see the splinter in another's eye than to see the log in our own. How many of us who confess our sins and affirm our faith through the creeds are not willing to see the injustices around us?

The pandemic has turned our lives upside-down. We have been struggling to deal with the situation physically, mentally, spiritually, and economically. In times of difficulty and chaos, it is very easy to despair and fear. We can see it in Exodus. While the Israelites

were led out of bondage from the Egyptians and were facing difficulty and challenge in the desert, they challenge Moses. Having lost faith and sight of God's presence, they would rather be back in bondage.

Just like the Israelites, we may long to go back to the previous 'normal' life. However, we are beginning to realise that life will never be quite the same. Things will be different, although we cannot yet describe the new future, life as it will be.

Yet there are some constants. We are commanded to love God and love our neighbours. Where love and justice are absent, are we willing to see it and change it? Or do we prefer to maintain the status quo, going back to where we were?

Are we willing to embrace the new reality and to make it better than the old in how we live and relate to each other?

Jesus' questioning of the chief priests and elders was holding up a mirror. In this crisis, we are also invited to look at ourselves in the mirror. We are invited to take the path of love, to see the reality around us, and to use our voices to proclaim the kingdom of God, to speak up about injustice, about all that diminishes our humanity, with love and truth.