

Sermon for Sunday 27.09.26 (Trinity 17)

Texts: Philippians 2:1-13 and *Matthew 21:23-32*

+ May I speak in the name of the living God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

If I asked you to describe Jesus, I wonder how you would answer. Whatever we think I'm pretty sure that we would all have a slightly different take. Our image of Jesus will be influenced by many different things. We might have reached a conclusion based on what others have told us about Jesus; but equally our vision of him might just as easily have come from paintings or stained-glass windows, or as we read the gospels, our own imaginations.

For many people Jesus is recognised as loving, gentle and compassionate. But that isn't the whole picture.

The Jesus of the Bible is not always kind or accommodating, especially to the religious leaders of his own day. There are many occasions when Jesus did not try to smooth over the conflicts they had with him. He was definitely not one for a quiet life or an easy compromise.

Because of this the chief priests and the temple authorities weren't just wary of Jesus; often the things he said and the things he did actually infuriated them. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had invested much in their faith and their community. They believed that they were upholding the teaching and the law of God. And so, they didn't want this preacher from Nazareth to stir things up and to upset their traditions and question their teaching.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew shows Jesus in conflict with the temple authorities yet again.

Just prior to today's passage we read that he has entered Jerusalem on a donkey. That wouldn't have been out of the ordinary, but when Jesus entered the city the crowds cheered, waved palm branches and shouted Hosanna, a word that means "Save us."

For the religious leaders this was a big problem. This wasn't the way a visiting preacher entered the city. According to the prophet Zechariah, it was the way the promised King, the Messiah would arrive.

And if that wasn't enough Jesus goes into the temple and turns over the tables of the money changers. Its one of those stories that many of us know well, and so we sometimes forget how shocking Jesus actions really were. So perhaps it's no wonder that the religious leaders wanted to question him.

They saw Jesus as a troublemaker and so at the beginning of our reading they ask him “By what authority are you doing these things?” Or in other words, “who do you think you are?”

And as is so often the case Jesus responds with a question. He asks them where they thought John the Baptist’s authority had come from.

And it’s a tough question. They knew that if they said “It was from God” he’ll ask why they didn’t follow John. But if they said it was only from men then they were afraid of the crowds who all thought that John was a prophet. So, they sit on the fence.

And Jesus tells them the parable of the two sons. This short story of the son who says he’ll go and work for his father in the vineyard but doesn’t, versus the son who says he won’t work for his father but does, is a description of how the chief priests and elders are blind to what God actually asks of them.

And then to push home his point he tells them that the people who have really responded to God's call through John aren't respectable people or religious leaders like them. They are tax collectors and prostitutes, people who the temple authorities rejected as nobodies, people who they treated as beyond the love and grace of God.

They, just like those who are treated as outcasts in today's society, experienced rejection and judgement by both the communities they lived in and the religious authorities. Yet Jesus invited them to follow him. And they did.

The religious leaders must have been mortified. His acceptance of those they were uncomfortable with led them to realise that he was questioning their traditions, and perhaps even their belief about the very nature of God.

To be clear the religious leaders in Jerusalem weren't bad people; they just wanted the Jews to be more faithful and to keep the rules and regulations that God had laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. Jesus however challenged them to adapt and to change. To really listen to what God wanted them to do.

I have always understood that there are many people that don't have a faith or a belief in God. But I have also wondered why people who do, either don't come to church, or if they do come, decide to leave. And there are many reasons. One of the initiatives by the central Church of England almost 20 years ago was 'Back to Church Sunday'. The idea was that we invited people back who had stopped coming. It's a great idea – but it didn't explore why they left in the first place.

Sometimes people leave the Church because those of us who are part of it, and that definitely includes today's religious leaders like me, can forget what we are here to do.

And that, as St Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, is to consider the interests of others, to encourage and to love, and to try to become as Jesus was, when he humbled himself and became obedient to God's will.

So, I guess what I want to say then is that if the Church has ever given the impression that you are not good enough, or that you have been made to feel unwelcomed or rejected or judged; I am very sorry. Because if that's the case then, perhaps without realising it, and maybe without meaning to either, the message of Jesus had been forgotten.

Sometimes, without intending to, Christians, get it wrong and forget one of the core values that Jesus taught.

And that is that everyone, no matter what their situation is, no matter what they have done or failed to do, whether they are here this morning, or not, are welcome in God's house.

And the readings remind us too that Jesus didn't just come to throw open the doors of the temple or the Church for everyone; he came to open up the way to the kingdom of heaven. He came to show us God's great love for everyone. And in humbling himself and dying on a cross he allowed us to be forgiven and made whole.

Jesus came to say to that you are welcome. You are welcome today and always in this sacred place of worship and of prayer. And you are welcome in God's eternal home forever.

AMEN