

Sunday 27 September 2020  
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison  
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

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Opening Prayer:

Gracious God,  
we thank you for being ever present with us.  
We know that we are never alone.  
Your mercies have been faithful and rich.  
Pour out your Spirit upon us,  
that we might do the work of your will.  
In the name of the Father, the Son,  
and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Matthew 21:23-32

The authority of Jesus questioned

<sup>23</sup> 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?'

<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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?" <sup>26</sup> But if we say, "Of human origin"— we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.'

<sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.'

Then he said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

### The parable of the two sons

<sup>28</sup> '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."

<sup>29</sup> "'I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> 'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup> '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. <sup>32</sup> 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.'

*NIVUK*

## Sermon:

In today's reading from the Gospel, we see Jesus in the Temple, where only the day before he had thrown out all the moneychangers and traders, who were using the Temple as a place of commerce.

The Chief Priests were angry that Jesus had done this, because they were complicit in this trading arrangement, it would not have happened without their say so and they allowed it because it brought in a tidy profit (not a good Prophet) for the Temple and maybe even for the Priests themselves.

After 'purging' the Temple, Jesus left the City and spent the night at Bethany, (The name Bethany has been understood to mean 'house of affliction' or 'House of Poverty,' quite a contrast to the Temple at that time).

Lazarus, Mary and Martha lived in Bethany, and it is possible that Jesus stayed the night at their home.

In the morning Jesus returned to the City and went back to the Temple to teach, and almost as soon as He had started teaching the Chief Priests and the Elders of the people came, (they had obviously posted their sentries to warn them when Jesus returned).

The Chief priests and Elders asked Jesus a question, one that was clearly designed to put Him in trouble. They wanted to either humiliate Jesus or to turn the people against Him, showing Him up as an insignificant itinerant preacher with no social standing and no approval from the recognized authorities.

'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (If they knew who they were speaking to, the Creator of all that is, would they have had such foolish audacity!)

The Chief Priest were the ones who chose from among themselves who would be appointed as the High Priest, they considered themselves to be the ultimate religious authorities in Israel, and had the Romans not been the occupying force, they would have thought of themselves as the most important political authority.

They had not endorsed Jesus in any way and they knew that He had received no backing from the Romans, so as far as they were concerned Jesus was an nobody from an insignificant little town (Nazareth Where did you say that was? Did anything good ever come out of Nazareth?).

They took the view that if Jesus had not received the proper endorsements from the proper authorities then He should not be doing what He was doing.

John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress, was born in 1628 at Elstow near Bedford in England. Like his father, he became a travelling tinker, and in his travels encountered the Puritans, members of the Religious Reform Movement within the Church of England. In associating with Puritans, John came under the influence of a Mr John Gifford, Minister at the Separatist Church in Bedford; where later John was to become a lay Minister.

John Bunyan began drawing crowds, but just as his popularity was growing, Charles II was restored to the Crown (1660) and the freedom of religion that the Separatists had enjoyed for nearly 20 years was soon to be brought to an end. Those who did not conform the Church

of England could face prosecution and prison. Bunyan was ordered by the Church of England authorities to stop preaching: he refused to give up preaching about the Gospel and was eventually imprisoned. Bunyan and countless Christians through the ages have followed the example of Jesus and have defied those powers that would silence them.

When Bunyan was before the Magistrates who ordered him to stop preaching, he said,

“I would rather remain in prison till the moss grows on my eyelids than fail to do what God commands.”

Bunyan was to spend twelve years in Prison. (And we know the blessings that his sufferings brought to millions of people over the centuries).

Who says who can or cannot preach the Gospel? Who dictates who is or who is not allowed to tell others about Jesus Christ?

It is every Christian's duty, privilege and joy to tell others about the one that has saved us, the one we love. We may not be theologians, or gifted speakers, but if we know Jesus, we are able to share our faith with others of His love for us, (and them), and of what He has done for us, in short, we can speak of what we know.

Now let us return to the Temple and to the encounter between Jesus and the chief Priests.

The Chief Priests knew that by publicly asking Jesus where He derived His authority to teach, that He could not say that He had received it from them in which case the people were likely to discard Him and His influence would come to an abrupt end.

These cunning men thought that they had boxed Jesus into a corner, they must have felt very smug, but they did not reckon with the wisdom of Jesus.

In response to their question, Jesus asks them one, and He puts it to them that if they answer it correctly, He will tell them where He got His authority to preach and do the things He does.

Here is a paraphrase of Jesus' question:

"Do you remember John the Baptist? Well, where did his authority come from?"

My, my, the smug Chief Priests were now pushed back into their own corner with nowhere to turn except the way Jesus intended. There was intense discussion among the Chief Priests and Elders as they tried to come back with a smart answer, but they were outwitted.

You see they realized that if they were to say John's authority came from Heaven, Jesus would ask them why they did not believe what John said, (Remember John had pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and the implication from what Jesus says, is that they did not believe him).

But if they were to say that John's authority lay only in human origins, that is, from himself, then the people would be very angry with them, because they regarded John as a prophet sent by and empowered by God.

These Chief Priests who were meant to represent God to the people and the people to God, had ignored God and were afraid of the people.

Though they knew that John was indeed a prophet sent by God, they chose not to acknowledge it, rather they gave a non-committal answer to Jesus' question, 'We do not know.'

These were the very men that ought to have known, and to have given the lead in acknowledging God and those whom He has sent as His servants.

Woe betide preachers if they do not speak the truth as revealed to them through and in God's Word, and woe betide them if they become so afraid of the people that they will speak only those things that please their hearers (Or readers).

Indeed woe betide all who profess to be followers of Jesus and do not acknowledge Him before others, or if they reject Him because His commands seem too harsh.

Because the Chief Priests did not answer Jesus' question, He did not answer theirs. They knew in their hearts where Jesus' authority came from, for no one had done the things that He had done, no one before Him had given such insight into the Holy Scriptures, and no one before Him had shown such humility combined with such authority.

There is no question that Jesus had/has authority, for when He chased out the moneychangers and traders from the Temple, do we suppose they went willingly? Is it likely that the Chief Priests would have allowed Jesus to go unchallenged as He chased away a valuable source of income, if they were not in some way in awe at His authority? Surely they recognized that Jesus had an altogether different kind of authority to theirs.

What they were doing with Jesus was what they had done with John the Baptist; they refused to acknowledge that Jesus had been sent by God (It seems to have been beyond their imagination that He might actually be God).

Having stunned them into silence, Jesus then tells them the parable, of two sons.

Two sons each of whom were given an instruction from their father; the first son says 'I will not,' but later relents and does what his father told him to do. The second son having been told what to do by his father says, 'I will sir.'" (How flattering), but although he said he would do as his father had told him, he doesn't.'

Jesus then asks the Chief Priests, "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

This was such a simple question that there could be only one answer, 'The first,' they reply.

Now Jesus makes His point: the people you look down on, the outcast of society, the criminal underclass, the cheaters, the sexually permissive, they are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you, you the religious elite.

These sinners whom you look down upon, believed John (the Baptist), they repented and turned to God.

The first son in the parable represents them, they had refused god in their life and had rejected His ways, but in hearing John they changed and turned to God.

The second son in the parable represents you the Chief Priests and the religious leaders, 'the unco guid,' who give the impression that you have God in your lives and that you have repented of your sin and are following God, yet you are only giving that impression, for even after hearing John's message you did not believe and repent.

Those who know themselves to be sinners, repented and believed, those who thought themselves righteous saw no need to repent.

It is the same with people today. When a person is living a life that is, 'obviously,' sinful, (At least to themselves and maybe to others), when they have an authentic encounter with Jesus, they become very aware of their sin and of their need of forgiveness and they are thus compelled to repent, just like John Newton the slave trader who wrote 'Amazing Grace that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.'

Those who think of themselves as unco guid, or in English, 'exceedingly good, are unlikely to consider their own sin as serious, for they think they have few, (if any), and what sins they might have are of a trivial nature.

Rather such people look on the sins of others, and they are inclined to compare themselves with those whose sins are considered gross, obviously in their comparison they hope to come out rather well and even compliment themselves that they are not nearly as bad.

Robert Burns observed this in his poem, The Unco Guid.

'O ye wha are sae guid yersel,  
Sae pious and sae holy,  
Ye've nought to do but mark and tell,  
Your neebours' fauts and folly..'

The religious leaders of Jesus' day (And perhaps of every age) had fallen into the sin of looking at the sin of others, comparing themselves with them and then thinking of themselves as better, purer, and even holier. They had missed the point; they like every human being, were sinners too and were in need of repentance, in need of forgiveness, in need of Jesus Christ, The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Amen!

### **Prayers of Intercession:**

Let us pray for the needs of the world, saying,  
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God, who is ever present,  
you hear our cries and are ever faithful in your mercy.  
We come to you with our concerns  
for ourselves, our community, and the world.

For our church and its leaders—  
fill them with the spirit and mind of Christ  
so that they would serve you and others.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For our country and global community—  
enable our leaders to make decisions  
for the sake of people and not profits,  
to serve others and not themselves.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For our local community—  
*[local concerns may be named].*

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For those who suffer with sickness, sadness,  
bereavement, anxiety, or abuse—  
envelop them in your love  
and help us to be their community.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For the other intentions we hold in our hearts.  
*[A time of silence is kept.]*

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God,  
we know that you walk with us, and you answer when we call.  
With gratitude and trust, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

*(FOW worship)*

### **Commemoration of the Faithful Departed**

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the Church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

## **The Lord's Prayer**

OUR Father which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:  
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
For ever. Amen.

## **The Blessing**

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!