

Sunday 1 October 2023
Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-end
NT: Philippians 2:1-13
Gp: Mathew 21: 23-32

Today's gospel story takes place in the temple; it was not just a place of worship and teaching, it was also the capital, the marketplace, the court, the seat of political power. And Jesus, who had just entered Jerusalem to the shouts and praise of the crowd, what we commemorate as Palm Sunday, is now sitting in the Temple, instructing, calling to account the priests and civic leaders, the ones who were running the place and foreseeing that the entire thing was going to be wrecked. Jesus was not talking about differences between this church and the one on the next block; Jesus was talking about a fundamental change to the spiritual and social and political and justice system.

Today's Gospel parable is clearly directed at the religious and civil leaders of the people in Jesus' time. But they did not understand what Jesus was telling them through his life and teaching, specifically, the spirit of love, caring and forgiveness for the weak and on the margins. They also heard the teaching of Jesus but made no effort to carry it out. For the leaders, authority came with a title, with reverence in society, with affluence and status, with the ability to make choices that the people would obediently agree and with the weight of past on their side. But that was not the type of authority that Jesus was modelling to them. Religious and political leadership demands courage to do what is right. Today's gospel reading is tense and so much of the conflict with midpoint on the question of authority. I can't help but wonder what answer they anticipated when they asked him where he got his authority.

To discredit Jesus, the leaders ask him for his authorizations. So even though they know the truth that John was preaching a godly message and they know what they want to say but they take the middle road and say, "we don't know". There are plenty of times when the right thing to say is "I don't know". The world would be a much better place if we were more prepared to admit to others. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of those on the margins, the vulnerable. Jesus was worked out in a life hallmarked by personal sacrifice and a death on the cross. His authority was not some sort of power brought with fame and wealth. Jesus is not predicting what will happen after death, he's talking about the quality of this life, right now. They can begin to live more fully into God's calling, now. How is God calling us to more love and more justice?

You'll have noticed two different parts to the Gospel reading. The first, a challenge to Jesus' authority coming from the religious and civic leaders. The second, a story about two sons and many scholars feel that Jesus might have composed it himself to present the situation of the early church.

It is a straightforward parable and the issue projected presents clear choices. It opens the mind of the listener and reader to judge what is right: whether it is good to say something

you will do and later not do it or to promise someone that you will not do something and later regret the action and do it. We may assume its message is simply: actions speak louder than words or its about obeying God. Ultimately neither Son in the parable is perfect. Sometimes we might get things wrong, and we need God's grace and love.

What is clear from this Gospel and from the First Reading from book of prophet Ezekiel is that God is primarily concerned with our present relationship to him. As far as the past is concerned, God has a very short memory. In fact, we might say he has none. This is the "injustice" of God that Ezekiel mentions. Today's second reading from Philippians calls us to remember that we are a community in Christ allowed by the Holy Spirit and called to hold the interests of others and the will of God higher than our own interests. St Paul's letter to the Philippians is a personal letter to friends signifying his concern for them in real ways and not just in words. It is a model for us both in our daily lives and in our church life.

The reading is all about transformation. Jesus, even though he had the same authority as God did not look out for his own interests but to the interest of others. We might not all think that we have power and authority but all of us are challenged today by the readings from the gospel of Mathew and Philippians to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. We are called to do what Jesus did. And that is so hard to do. How often do we forget where is Jesus hanging out?

And the promise Paul shares with us is that Jesus' supporting act of submission changes us too. We are allowed to not only speak justice and mercy and truth but live it out, the way Jesus did, in actions as well as words. The letter from Paul to the Philippians also reminds us that God is at work in us. The Holy Spirit enables us to comfort the sick, show kindness to people we might not like. Christ invites us to the table where we are fed, nourished, and transformed by Christ living in us. In receiving Christ into ourselves we receive the strength to go into the world in a mission of serving God. We have the responsibility to our wider world, to work for justice, and peace and to meet human need.

To finish I will share a story. A builder was ready to retire. He told his contractor of his plans to leave the house-building business and live a happier life with his extended family. He would miss the pay check, but he needed to retire. The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a help. The builder said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to use inferior supplies. It was an unsuccessful way to end a dedicated career.

When the builder finished his work, the contractor came to review the house. He handed the front door key to the builder "this is your house", he said, "my present to you!" The builder was shocked! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so in a different way. So, it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, sometimes putting not as much of our effort than our best into the building. Then with a shock we realize we must live in the house we have built. If we could do it over, we would do it much another way. But we cannot go back. So, we should build sensibly.

Revd Tabitha Rao