

Matthew 21:23-32 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."

The Parable of the Two Sons

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."

Disputing with the Chief Priests and Elders

As we move through the weeks since Trinity Sunday and towards Christ the King, we move through Matthew's gospel, and as we move on, the antagonism between the religious authorities and Jesus sharpens. In the passage we have just read we are now in Jerusalem, Jesus has triumphantly entered, and it is Monday of Holy Week. Jesus's triumphal entry has riled the various parties of the Sanhedrin, the ruling authorities, and so a deputation is sent out to take on Jesus as he teaches in the temple. He is teaching stuff that they cannot agree with, he is undermining their authority, and he seems to be talking of grace and relationship with God that functions outside the mediation of the temple. What follows is the beginnings of their heightened tension — which will persist with the next two charged parables, about the tenants in the vineyard, and the negligent wedding guests. Here, Jesus could not be plainer when he first skewers them with their views on John the Baptist, and secondly attacks their practical faith with a parable as direct as any he told. This is the beginning of Jesus's trial — albeit the court is not formal but that of public opinion, and the opinion of the elders and chief priests, who are highly influential.

So — 'by what authority do you do these things?' they ask. These things are his allusive, messianic flavoured entry to Jerusalem, and his teaching. 'Great question,' Jesus replies (more or less). 'But before I answer, you have to declare your view on John the Baptist.' Why did Jesus ask this? It's not a stalling tactic nor a diversion. He needs to force their public declaration of their opinion of John — not least because Jesus fully supports John's prophetic message, and John fully proclaimed Jesus. But a second key reason is this: John's baptism was an urgent call to repentance and grace that functioned independently to and unsanctioned by, the Jerusalem temple. Were they going to publicly say that John's message was not from God? Could they admit that the refreshing grace he offered was *offensive* to them? Jesus offers in this

counter-question a better riposte than the question he is asked, and they know it. Surprise, surprise — the chief priests *do* know their opinion, but lie that they don't. And Jesus has no qualms in telling them he won't answer — albeit that the answer is the same. His authority is John's authority — it is the Lord who commissioned both.

What now is the link between this exchange and the two sons? It is that John had preached both repentance and grace. He had signalled universally that it was time to turn to God, and that there was grace to all. Many ordinary people did indeed turn around and accept that grace, and found more of it through Jesus — but the Sanhedrin: the priests, elders and teachers of the law did not change their ways, did not accept John's or Jesus's baptism or grace, nor accept the legitimacy of it. On the surface they were people of God, but without the robes you couldn't see it. They were the sons who said: 'yes we'll work', but never actually started — while others did not look like servants of God, but had seen themselves humbly and sincerely, accepted God's grace, through John and Jesus, and were finding God again.

Indeed there is an interesting point to note here. Throughout this gospel Jesus has spoken of the kingdom of heaven, but here in this moment he talks of the kingdom of God. Is this a trivial difference? Perhaps, but it emphasises perhaps that relationship with God is central to the kingdom. It is the kingdom *of God*. These chief priests and elders saw God incarnate standing in front of them, and they absolutely did not see it. Their relationship with God was a bare acquaintance, while others were embracing a personal knowledge of God.

When Martin Luther began the re-examination of theology that happened through the reformation he formed five 'only' statements that were the core of his part of the reformation — only by scripture, only by Christ, only by faith, only by grace, and only to the glory of God. This is a pretty decent summary of protestant faith. But how is that faith shown? Luther was reacting to a Catholicism that seemed to reckon that works could buy you salvation — and far more disturbingly, gifts of money could buy you prayers for your soul in the afterlife. So works were out, for Luther, but what is the point or even the meaning of repentance that brings no change? So works aren't necessary to salvation, but a necessary demonstration that salvation is happening in a person.

Writers talk about 'show, don't tell'. For example: don't tell me the hero of your story is angry — show me a man slamming the door as he storms through. Don't tell me she is a Christian, show me a woman who begins her day in prayer, who gives to charity, who cares for the widow down her street. St Francis allegedly suggested the same thing: 'preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary!' In the same way, we must ask the question — does our faith show? Do our actions preach the gospel? What more could I show of my faith, my love, and my service for Jesus? Which of the parable's sons am I?

Personally, I hate the thought that Jesus might knock on the door, give me work to do, and I should ignore him, not knowing who he was. Or perhaps I might find his manifesto too radical too extreme — as the chief priests clearly thought.

But in the end this is a question we each must ask ourselves. If we could never use words, who would know of our faith? What difference would we make?

Don't be negative — you show your faith in many ways — but this is a question worth reflecting on.

Amen.

'From Crime to Christianity' at croissants@church 9.30 for 10am Sunday 8th