

Today's Gospel is part of Matthew Chapter 21, which is all about the conflict between the 'new way' of Jesus and the 'old ways' of the Temple authorities. It occurs after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey – the text we read on Palm Sunday. He overturned the money-changers' tables, declaring that the Temple officers had made the sacred building into a profane house of commerce, and carried out several acts of healing. Meanwhile, people were still shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David." The Temple officials asked, "What authority do you have to do "these things" and who gave you that authority? In other words, why did Jesus presume to have the right to behave this way on the Temple officials' turf (the Temple precincts)? And who had given him that right?"

Jesus responded obliquely by saying, "First answer me this question: 'Was John the Baptist's baptism divinely ordered, or was it just some idea that John dreamed up on his own?'" This tied the questioners in knots. They did not want to say that John's actions were divinely inspired. If so, they should have believed him, and accepted the words of the heavenly voice that proclaimed Jesus as God's Son. But they did not want to argue the opposite, because this debate was taking place in the presence of crowds of Jesus' supporters shouting "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of Lord." So it was a stand-off, with Jesus winning the debate 'on points.' The Temple officials refused to commit themselves, and Jesus said, "Then I won't answer you either."

The answer to Jesus's question seems obvious to us today, because we have two thousand years of Christian tradition behind us. Jesus was (is) the Son of God, so of course he had divine authority to teach and heal. For a moment, let's set aside those two thousand years of Christian tradition, because the issue of who Jesus was can still make us uncomfortable. Jesus' baptism and the pronouncement of the heavenly voice were miraculous; they defied rational explanation. Either we must accept divine intervention in human affairs at face value, or find other justifications for accepting Jesus as God's Son and a window into the divine mystery. Otherwise, Jesus becomes merely a wonderful teacher who taught ideas that were ahead of his time – such as setting aside 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' and the Golden Rule of 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' But those are moral teachings, not divinity. Our conundrum is identical to the one faced by the Temple officials.

We then read a parable about two sons. One said he would do what his father asks but didn't; the other said he would not do what he was asked but then changed his mind. Jesus asked, "Which son did the will of the father?" We all get the right answer – the one who said 'no' but did 'yes'. So what?

The 'so what' is that this little parable forms a bridge between the Temple officials' challenge to Jesus and the parable of the wicked tenants, which we will read next week. Matthew Chapter 21 as a whole takes issue with the Jewish leadership for failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The clue in the parable is that the sons were sent to work in a vineyard, which is repeatedly used as a metaphor for Israel in the Old Testament. The Jewish leadership professed to be looking for a Messiah who would usher in the righteous rule of God, but did not recognize it in the person of Jesus among them. Unlike them, the dregs of society – tax collectors and prostitutes – believed what John the Baptist had told them: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near." In this explanation, the father who asks his sons to work in the vineyard is not any old father, but God the Father (capital F), asking the Temple officials to help bring in the Kingdom of God in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel.

In the NRSV Bible, the “good son” was the first one. One author I consulted noted that the father turns to the second son for help when the first one refuses. But other ancient manuscripts reverse the order, so that it is the second son who did the will of the father. That order makes the two sons metaphoric. Israel is the son who says yes but does not follow through; the early Christians are the son who realizes who Jesus was, and do God’s will. It is a polemic against the Temple authorities.

Although we easily identify the ‘better’ son in the parable, neither of them was a paragon of virtue. One didn’t do what he’d promised; the other gave a snippy answer to Dad, even though he relented later. There is also an uncomfortable message for many modern Christians (and dare I say it, us too). Do we say that we will follow Jesus and proclaim the Good News, but actually don’t do anything about it? Perhaps we don’t bother to go into the vineyard at all, or perhaps we make it into the vineyard but don’t do any back-breaking work like hoeing the weeds between the vines or gathering the grapes. In that regard, I have a lot of respect for the Jehovah’s Witnesses who go door to door to proclaim the Good News, often to hostile homeowners, or the ones I see in Guelph who set up and man (person?) sandwich boards and displays of literature in the street.

In ordinary life, we often encounter people like the son who said yes but didn’t follow through. Children with untidy bedrooms, who say “Yes, I’ll tidy up” but don’t. People in the workplace who say, “Sure, I’ll help you on that project,” but don’t do anything. They drive us up the wall! Luckily, I have not encountered that problem at St. George’s. Imagine if the ACW had said, “Sure, we’ll arrange the picnic” last week, but when we got to church on Sunday nothing had been bought or prepared.

To me, the Temple officials in the first part of the reading come across as very human. They challenged Jesus as to what and whose authority he had for his teaching and healing. Because we know the story, we can scoff at their unwillingness to accept new ideas or changes. But in reality, most of us resist change – except for the ones we advocate ourselves (and then we criticize those who won’t go along with our brilliant ideas). People in the advertizing industry talk about “early adopters” who embrace new ideas and new products. I know that I am rather more conservative. I wasn’t an early adopter in having a computer, or a cell phone, though I now admit that they are very useful.

I imagine that the Temple officials in Jesus’ day were dismayed and fearful at the changes that they saw in society. Israel had been a theocracy with them in control. Their political system had been ruptured by the Roman occupation. Where would that leave them? They had lost control. The last thing they needed was this new and popular preacher Jesus shaking up the religious side of society just when the Romans had shaken up the secular side. Had he come from God, as John the Baptist claimed, or was he just the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of yet another televangelist?

South of the border, President Trump behaves truly despicably in fomenting division and hatred, yet I suspect that deep down many of his supporters are like those Temple officials, decent people who are dismayed and fearful about societal change. Like many Canadians, they wonder about their role in the family, the workplace, and the wider society (or about declines in church membership). They and we worry that they cannot control the changes that are happening around them. The vineyard can be a scary place. There may be wasps or snakes hiding among the vines. All too often, we are like the son in Jesus’ parable who decided not to risk going.