



Sunday Reflection

17th Sunday after Pentecost

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 27 September 2020

Pentecost 17

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Matthew 21.23

An Illustration to set the scene



"Alexa! Say the Lord's Prayer!" It was recently reported that Cambridge University Press have arranged for the 1662 Book of Common Prayer to be available on smart speakers. This means you could shout out in the kitchen and have Alexa read you a prayer or an entire service. There may of course be plenty of room for confusion if the smart speaker mistakes your prayer for a shopping list!

As any of us in contact with small children know, kids these days see nothing strange in speaking to technology to tell it to carry out their instructions. In my day, the voice of authority was a parental one. I knew how to identify the tone that expected the

answer, "Yes, Dad!", rather than, 'Alright' or 'If you say so'! Sometimes when we are unsure of our authority, we fall back on exerting our power. In response to "but, why should I?", what parent has not said, "just because I say so!"

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, the ruling powers - the chief priests and elders - question the authority of Jesus to teach and perform signs. Those in power are looking to suppress the voice that is threatening their authority and the ways things are done in the name of religion.

Jesus responds with a question that ties them in knots: was John the Baptist's authority of divine or human origin? If they agree that John was a prophet sent from God, then the obvious retort is they should have listened to him and repented. If they disagree, then the people who believed in John will turn against them. The rulers are silenced.

Jesus then tells a parable by way of indirectly answering their question. Two sons are told by their father to go and work in the vineyard. One says, "no", but later does it anyway. The other says, "sure", but then does not go. "Which of them carried out their father's will?", Jesus asks. It is, as we might say, a 'no-brainer'. "The first one!", they all shout.

Then Jesus unveils a challenge to those in power which is every bit as strong as his action in turning over the tables of the money-changers the day before: no one should be complacent about their right to be on top. For it is those at the bottom of the heap, prostitutes and tax collectors, who will go before the powerful into the Kingdom of God.

And why? Because they believed in John the Baptist's God-given authority and let God's authority transform how they lived. By implication, those who recognise and receive Jesus have the righteousness that the religious leaders claim for themselves. As

Paul says, referring back to Deuteronomy, “because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10.9).

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

Obedience is an old-fashioned virtue, but as Christians we are under obedience, not to external power but to the will of God revealed in Jesus. The saving act of obedience that is open to us is to allow ourselves to be inwardly transformed by belief in Jesus. As Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice, they know me and they follow me” (John 10.27).

We live in interesting times with respect to authority and compliance. On the one hand, experts are questioned, politicians distrusted (it was ever thus) and on the other hand, the vast majority of people have heeded instructions to accept significant restrictions on their lives in order to protect others.

There are two ways that we can recognise the difference between giving in to power and doing the right thing because we are humbly following Christ. The first is how we feel. When we listen to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we don't feel disempowered, but rather we have a sensation of freedom, as if our choices have been opened up.

And the second difference is in how we are prompted to act. Here our model is Jesus who, as we hear in the Epistle, had authority through emptying himself of power in humble obedience to the Father. By God's grace we pray that we will use any authority that is given to us to build up others and never to put them down.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Matthew 21.23

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God's spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the

words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk

ⁱ cartoon is from the Church Times on 17 September 2020.

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/18-september/news/uk/new-alexa-skill-to-help-say-the-office-from-the-prayer-book>