

## **REFLECTING ON GOD'S WORD**

**Reading:** Matthew 21: 23-32 (NT Page 989)

### **BACKGROUND TO THE READING**

In our reading , Matthew tells another shocking story of Jesus challenging the political leaders of his day.

The true intention of this reading is very complex especially if we do not take the context in consideration.

In Jesus' day it was all about challenge and repost, gaining or losing either honour or shame. If you could not answer to a question or a challenge, then you were considered to be in shame while the other person gained honour.

It is remarkable that the scene of conflict is the temple where Jesus was teaching the people. It is clear that the religious leaders wanted to show off their positions of power by asking Jesus on whose authority He is teaching. They challenge Jesus in public with only one intention namely to bring his name in disrepute and shame.

But Jesus rose to the challenge by challenging them with a very difficult question, namely on whose authority did John the Baptist act - Heaven, or in other words God or man? This response follows the Jewish legal principle that a commissioned messenger acts on the full authority of the one who sent him. If they said that John acted as a "prophet" from God, Jesus would

ask them why they did not listen to him. If they said that he acted not on behalf of God, the people would be offended because they thought of John as the prophet who was sent by God.

The chief priests were politicians and less popular than the politically powerless Pharisees—who had to balance the interests of both their people and the Roman authorities. They had to keep popular opinion in mind when making decisions that might incur the displeasure of the people. No wonder they were worried about answering the question in a “politically correct way”.

Then Jesus challenged them even more by telling a parable whereby they must choose who is the righteous in the story.

A Father is asking his son to go and work in the vineyard. That a father should have asked his son to go work in the vineyard was natural. That the son should have refused to go would have offended Jewish moral sensibilities: this was an openly disobedient son, and disobedience was a punishable offense. He was also disrespectful and acting in a shameful way. But equally - failing to go after promising to go was worse than not having promised; this son violated his word to his own father. He lied and acted in a shameful manner too!

In order to understand what is going on we need to read Ezekiel 18:21-24 which clearly states: “But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he

has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live.”

According to this passage: “But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die.”

It is clear as daylight that the political leaders were right by choosing the first son.

But then Jesus wraps up the argument by answering the first question for them. John the Baptist, came to show them a righteous lifestyle, but they did not follow his example while the outcasts did.

The pious regarded tax gatherers and prostitutes as outside practicing Judaism. Jesus could not have chosen a much more offensive comparison.

Jesus was not only insulting the politicians of his day, He was challenging the claims of the TRUE ISRAEL, putting the new values in opposition to true Judaism, something that the politicians strongly believed in. In the two

other parables that follow He repeatedly deprives Judaism of its claim to be the TRUE ISRAEL. Positively he states the new values that are much more important namely that to God - all people who has faith matters, whether they are in shame or not like the prostitutes and the tax collectors.

He is saying it loud and clear: they, the Politicians must practice what they preach! If they believe that they have the authority from God then they must act it not like hypocrites but like people who genuinely believe in Him, in His inclusive love for all people.

**Amen**

## **SERMON**

óThe text verse for the sermon is <sup>23ó</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?”

I am sure that the political leaders thought of themselves as “agents” of God, doing the right thing, protecting the temple courts, preserving the LAW of God. I am sure they had no inclination that they were serving the institution and not God.

Because if they did serve God, they would have listened to the message of John the Baptist who clearly stated that the people need to turn back to God and repent. Only the tax collectors and the prostitutes listened, those who were marginalized.

Is this not true of us all? Sometimes we think we are serving God by doing all the “churchy things”. We actually think that we are doing God favours as if we as humans can do such a thing. And because we are building our empires inside the church, we are against change – any change to the established order of our empire - Something that happened exactly with Jesus. He was changing the “human made” empires of Judaism, changing the self man made rules to the RULE of God’s inclusive love.

While on the other hand if we serve in God’s church because He called us, there is no empires, no basis of power, no politics of who is having the “ministers ear”. Then it is a church where God’s Spirit is ruling supreme, where His Spirit blows and where He changes attitudes and people. His church, His Kingdom of heaven is not about you and me, it is not about building empires inside the church so that generations to come will remember us. It is about God’s Word that needs to be preached everywhere we go. It is not to force people through Bible bashing into the arms of Jesus. For some, just to touch Jesus’ hem, is good enough.

A church without change does not reflect the Spirit of God. The Greek word for conversion “Strepso” means to change all the time to the person God

wants us to be. And the same is true of the church of today, the church must constantly change to the church God wants us to be.

People that build empires often reject change and want to continue like it has been done for years. They do not ask themselves why they are doing what they are doing? Are they doing it because God called them! Sometimes our actions speak louder than our words.

Sometimes I think we can get our journey of faith completely wrong like the story I read on the internet.

There is the story about two farmers who were rivals. "Two Kentucky farmers who owned racing stables had developed a keen rivalry. One spring, each of them entered a horse in a local steeplechase. Thinking that a professional rider might help him outdo his friend, one of the farmers engaged a professional jockey. The two horses were leading the race at the last fence, but it proved too tough for them. Both horses fell, unseating their riders. But this calamity did not stop the professional jockey. He quickly remounted and won the race.

Returning triumphant to the paddock, the jockey found the farmer who had hired him fuming with rage. "What's the matter?" the jockey asked. "I won, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes," roared the farmer. "You won all right, but you still don't know, do you?" "Know what?" asked the jockey. "You won the race on the wrong horse."

While this situation does not occur often at horse races, it happens in every human life. Each of us, trying hard to win the race of faith tends to climb on the wrong horse. If we do not discover our error, we cross the finish line a triumphant failure.

So no – let us decide now, all of us, to climb on the right horse by ways of speaking.

But not on a High horse like the Clydesdale where we think that we are better than others,

not on a war horse, where we fight everyone who dares to make our empires crumble,

not on a race horse where we race all the time never stopping,

not on a ploughing horse where we want to solve all life's problems and other people's problems.

No let us climb on the horse God called us to climb on and let us change the course of the race forever, where it is not about how quickly I can reach the finishing line regardless of the consequences, where it is not about defending the empires that we build but where it is about doing God's will in this Parish.

And his will is that we include everyone in His salvation and hope for the world, that we love unconditionally and obeyingly serve Him with our lives,

where we listen to what He wants us to do. Sometimes we tend to put the cart before the horses!

The Chief priests and elders were not fruitful. They were in the positions that they were in and made little impact upon the world that they lived in. They were instead ineffective. They liked being in charge of religious matters. Jesus and His views were a threat to their way of doing things. Their views were, it seems, shaped by their own agenda. They seemed to exhibit a behavior that acknowledged God and their obedience to God. Yet, their actions---their seeming promise was lacking in performance. They were all about works without faith, it seems.

When we obey we are fruitful. And this is the lesson for us today. We need to ask ourselves constantly: Am I obeying God or my own agendas? Am I here to show others how wonderful person I am or am I here because God called me? Am I involved in church life because I like it or because God called me?

May each one of us restrain ourselves from empire building and obey God like the prostitutes and tax collectors did a long time ago.

Amen