

A SERVICE FOR THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

GREETING

In the name of the Father
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The Lord be with you;
and also with you.

HYMN – *We Are One In The Spirit* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r982gxKVWN4>

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

PRAYER OF PENITENCE

Jesus says, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.'

So let us turn away from sin and turn to the Lord, confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

Matthew 4: 17

Friend of sinners,
you bring hope in our despair.

Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Healer of the sick,
you give strength in our weakness.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Destroyer of evil,
you bring life in our dying.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God,
who in Jesus Christ has given us
a kingdom that cannot be destroyed,
forgive you your sins,
open your eyes to God's truth,
strengthen you to do God's will,
and give you the joy of his salvation
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.

FIRST BIBLE READING – *Philippians 2: 1-13*

YOU ARE WORTHY

You are worthy, our Lord and God:
to receive glory and honour and power,

**for you have created all things:
and by your will
they were created and have their being.**

You are worthy O Christ, for you were slain:
and by your blood have ransomed us for God,

**ransomed us from every tribe and people and nation:
and made us a royal house of priests to our God.**

To the One who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb:

be blessing and honour, glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 4:11; 5:9,10,13.

Glory to God, Source of All Being,
Eternal Word and Holy Spirit;

**as it was in the beginning is now:
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

GOSPEL READING – *Matthew 21: 23-32*

REFLECTION - *Revd. Helen Duckett*

For the next few Sundays, our Gospel readings from Matthew will focus on the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities – the chief priest and elders of the people, the Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees.

In terms of reading our way through Matthew, we have skipped from Chapter 20: 1-16 from last week when we had the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard and are now in Matthew 21: 23-32. However, in doing this we have missed out some vitally important elements of the story which actually set the conflicts between Jesus and the religious authorities in their context. Because what we have missed out is the beginning of the stories of Holy Week and the events of Palm Sunday – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding in on a donkey and being hailed by the crowds as the Son of David; then, immediately after that, Jesus cleansing the Temple – overturning the tables of the traders and claiming that space back for God – and then healing the blind and the lame people who have gathered in the Temple precinct; and then the rather strange account of Jesus cursing a fig tree and causing it to wither.

All these events have just taken place immediately before our Gospel reading for today; so is it any wonder then that we read the opening words of our passage today in verse 23: "When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'"

This question reveals how Jesus was clearly a threat to the religious and social leaders of the day. He was exhibiting enormous and miraculous powers, the crowds were absolutely enthralled by him, his courage and boldness in confronting the institutions of power was astounding - of course they would want to question his authority...

And the questioning of the religious leaders comes out of the security they felt in their own authority. They were the leaders. They were in charge of the people. The chief priests were in a

spiritual lineage that went all the way back to Moses. The scribes were the most learned theologians in Jewish society. The elders had years of experience and had the unquestioning respect of the people.

But Jesus, very cleverly, has absolutely no intention in getting engaged in some abstract and conceptual debate about the nature of his authority in an attempt to prove that his authority is greater than theirs. Instead, he decides to ask them a question that will cause them to struggle as they are caused to reflect on the true nature of authority itself, verse 24: “Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’”

Now, this was a tough question for the religious leaders to answer, as Matthew rightly points out to us in verse 26 and 27, because no matter what they said, the answer was bound to upset someone...If they agreed that John the Baptist’s ministry came from God, then Jesus would say, “So why didn’t you listen to him and follow him?” But if they said that his ministry was not from God, then the crowds would have turned on them because they loved John the Baptist. There was no way they could win the argument against a question like that so, as Matthew tells us in verse 27, the best answer they could come up with was: “We don’t know”.

And in that moment, you could say, the religious leaders were unmasked for who they truly were. They claimed authority and power and privilege over the people. But their chief concern was to protect their standing in society and to protect their reputations. They didn’t give an answer because they didn’t want to lose what they had.

And, of course, in that encounter, we have a lesson for all politicians and religious leaders and vicars and all those who hold positions of authority in society today. The claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are intense. And all of us in political and spiritual leadership are called to moments of decision that will have profound impact for our future. Are we prepared to stand up for what is true and right in the eyes of God and to live out our ministries by the standards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Or will we seek to deny the truth in order to protect our power and position and status in the eyes of society, or our electorate, or our congregation?

The leaders whom Jesus was addressing were unable to recognise the authority of Jesus to challenge them in this way for the simple reason that he was acting out of a form of authority that they had never witnessed before. For them, authority came with a title, with respect in society, with wealth and prestige, with the ability to make decisions that the people would unquestioningly obey and with the weight of history on their side. But that was not the type of authority that Jesus was modelling to them as the authority of the Kingdom of God...

The authority of Jesus was of a completely different order altogether. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of sinners and prostitutes. The authority of Jesus was worked out in

his welcoming of little children. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of the outcasts and those on the margins. Ultimately, the authority of Jesus was worked out in a life of service, not ruling; a life hallmarked by betrayal and personal sacrifice, rejection, torture and a criminal's death on the cross. That is where the authority of Jesus lay: not in some sort of power game that brought with it prestige and wealth and the respect of the people. And the religious leaders had never seen anything like that before and had no idea how to respond to it...

And just as Jesus' understanding of authority was a challenge to the religious leaders of his day; so too it is to us who are called to follow him. Because what the nature of Jesus' authority reveals is that any authority which the Church might claim in our society today, any authority which Christians might claim in our society today, is an authority that is not hallmarked by wealth and power and prestige but, instead, is hallmarked by service, and by welcoming those on the margins and by welcoming the little children. Christians must form a community of sacrifice and vulnerability where those on the margins find a home. That is what authority in the Kingdom of God looks like and that is what a truly Christlike church must look like...

And so the challenge to us is whether we are prepared to develop our gifts and position in our own neighbourhoods, in our own places of work, on our own society to love and to serve those in need rather than to seek prestige and honour and respect from others. That is the ultimate value that underpins the work of God's Kingdom and it is a value which Jesus then explores in the rest of our Gospel reading with his Parable of the Two Sons.

In the parable, a father of two sons directs the first son to go and work in the vineyard. This son declines, but then changes his mind and goes. The second son is given the same directive, agrees, to go, but then doesn't. The religious authorities are then asked by Jesus: "Which of the two did the will of the father?"; and they really only have one option – to say "the first". While their previous face-saving tactic momentarily got them off the hook when talking about Jesus' authority, there is no possible evasion now. And then Jesus concludes by saying: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

In other words, the religious authorities' acknowledgement that the first son is obedient while the second son isn't, gives Jesus the opportunity to make the pointed application of the story. The tax collectors and the prostitutes may not on the surface look much like God's people, especially when compared with the pious religious authorities, but they are identified with the first on, and the religious authorities with the second, because they are the ones who have listened to the message of John the Baptist, and then of Jesus himself, and have responded by repenting and seeking forgiveness – just like the first son changed his mind and ultimately responded to his father's request to work in the vineyard. The religious authorities, on the other hand, are like the second son – they pretend to be listening and responding to the demands of the Kingdom, but ultimately, they fail to act, they fail to respond, they fail to repent and to seek forgiveness. And so the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the tax collectors, the prostitutes, those on the margins of society who know their need of grace and mercy and who are willing to listen and to change and to do the will of God.

And the authority of the Church, one of the agents of the Kingdom of Heaven, is to be found, not in prestige and power and appearing to say and to do the right thing; but in repentance, change, forgiveness and an acknowledgement that the first will be last and the last will be first...

As our parables from the past couple of weeks have also shown, through Jesus and through his proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven, a new order is being established, a new way of seeing and of doing is being instituted, a new authority is being revealed, and the world is truly being turned upside down...

HYMN – *All That I Am* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDXQ7eThFV4>

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Let us declare our faith in God,

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

INTERCESSIONS

In faith and hope we pray,

Lord of mercy,

Lord, hear us.

Almighty God,
you bring your chosen people together in one communion,
in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
We rejoice in your light and your peace
with your whole Church in heaven and on earth.

Lord of mercy,
Lord, hear us.

Give to all who mourn a sure confidence in your loving care,
that we may cast all our sorrow on you
and know the consolation of your love.

Lord of mercy,
Lord, hear us.

Give your faithful people pardon and peace,
that we may be cleansed from all our sins
and serve you with a quiet mind.

Lord of mercy,
Lord, hear us.

Give us strength to meet the days ahead
in the joyful expectation of eternal life with those you love.

Lord of mercy,
Lord, hear us.

Give to us who are still in our pilgrimage,
and who walk as yet by faith,
your Holy Spirit to lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Lord of mercy,
Lord, hear us.

May all who have been made one with Christ
in his death and in his resurrection
die to sin and rise to newness of life.

Lord of mercy,
Lord, hear us.

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

COLLECT FOR TRINITY 16

**Lord of creation,
whose glory is around and within us:
open our eyes to your wonders,
that we may serve you with reverence
and know your peace at our lives' end,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

HYMN – *We're In Christ United* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnhRKbmArZ8>

BLESSING

The peace of God,
which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, Jesus Christ;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you , and remain with you always.

Amen.

DISMISSAL

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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