

## **Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 27 September 2020**

The context of today's story is really important. Jesus has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem astride a donkey to the acclamation of a large crowd chanting and singing that he was the son of David. They have proclaimed him to be the long awaited Messiah.

He then goes to the temple, knocking tables asunder as he drives the money lenders out to reclaim that space back for God before leaving to stay overnight in Bethany. The next day on his return to the Temple he curses a fig tree, causing it to wither before healing a number of blind and lame people.

Little wonder then that the chief priests approach and ask Jesus where he got his authority from to do what he is doing, because they believed they were the true inheritors and executors of religious and spiritual authority granted to their tribe of Levi by God as far back as Moses' time.

But Jesus doesn't answer them directly and instead asks them about John the Baptist's authority – was it of human or divine origin? They are in a no win situation – if they say divine, they lay themselves open to the charge of blatant hypocrisy for not believing him – and if they say human, well, the words are in the text – they were afraid of the crowd who held him to be a prophet. Instead they give the very wimpish answer – we don't know.

So much for their spiritual authority! And, in that answer they are unmasked for who they truly were. It's easy for us to point the finger at the priests two thousand years on, knowing what follows but I'm conscious of what my old Grandma used to say about people in glass houses and throwing stones.

The chief priests wanted to maintain the status quo; not only were they resistant to change but also believed their way was the only way. But isn't that also true of many of us today?

Thirty years on from when the decision to ordain women was made by the Church of England there are still swathes of Anglicans who refuse to accept the authority of women priests and will only take communion from a male priest.

Or, the black candidate who was turned down when he applied for the post of vicar in a northern parish a few months ago because of the colour of his skin.

Or, lower down the pecking order, the reaction of some folk who refuse to attend a service where the clergy have chosen liturgy which is different to what they believe to be the 'proper' words to be used?

Or, those who prefer to cross the road rather than pass by a homeless person holding out their hand asking for money?

And so on and so on.

What about my authority?

Only a few years ago I was Terry no mates sitting in the pews alongside everybody else yet just a few months ago I was really overwhelmed by the sight of over 180 people coming to this church to support me as I was ordained Deacon.

And only yesterday, assuming this recording goes out on 20<sup>th</sup> September, just 4 people – the maximum allowed under Covid-19 regulations - were my invited guests in Reading Minster as I was ordained priest.

Does this mean my authority is any greater because of my change in status or because I was ordained in a Minster rather than a church or only in front of a very select few?

I don't believe so because my authority is grounded in the ministry of Jesus – the very thing that the chief priests rejected. Jesus once said that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him. I accept that without reservation, and as I said at my ordination, with God's help I will exercise that authority as led by the Spirit, diligently, humbly and in obedience. But, being obedient to Christ isn't the sole reserve of Church ministers; it is true for each and every church member.

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the two sons which perfectly illustrates the point Jesus was making about the chief priests; they who talk the talk but don't walk the walk.

The first son is rebellious and refuses to do the work, but subsequently does so. Unlike the second son, who says he will but then actually doesn't. So to us, just like the chief priests, the choice is obvious, the first son is the better son because he goes on to do the right thing even after refusing to do so initially.

The implication is hammered home by Jesus when he draws comparison between the different attitudes shown towards John the Baptist by the crowd and the chief priests. The despised tax collectors and prostitutes were entering kingdom of God because they had repented and turned their lives around because they believed John's teaching.

In stark contrast, the chief priests look as though they are doing what God willed by worshipping in the Temple and keeping up the appearance of being holy and righteousness but they refused to believe in John's message of repentance. The tax collectors, prostitutes and the like were, to their mind, unworthy.

So, that begs the question somewhat – who will be stood beside me in heaven – assuming, of course, my own entry ticket is validated at the pearly gates?

Jesus welcomes both the righteous and the lost and I think there is something important here about what causes us to change our minds; to be tolerant and accepting of people we do not normally meet or mix with in our daily lives. What is it that enables us to be compassionate towards those less fortunate than ourselves or have a different skin colour or are less affluent than we are.

And you won't be surprised to hear that I believe the answer is Jesus. On whose authority do I have the right to say that? The answer, again, is Jesus. But the critical point is that spiritual authority is not the preserve of the ordained but is given to each and every one of us as followers of Christ; the authority, as a fully fledged member of the body of Christ to share the love of God with our local and wider community.

That's what the high priests forgot about. Let's not fall into the same complacent trap. Instead, let us focus on sharing God's love with all we meet this week. Amen