**Sermon Matthew 21:23-32 – 1/10/23**

Sermon Videolink: <https://youtu.be/0rgYs3rMa0E>

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, he had entered the temple courts and drove out all the money changes and people selling animals for sacrifice. Then staying in the temple courts, he healed the blind and lame. In response, the children were shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The chief priests and elders were not impressed. If only they could discredit him, get rid of him even. In a few days, he would die.

The next day Jesus returned to the temple courts and began teaching and the chief priests and elders came to him. These were the people who had authority over what happened in the temple. How dare this rabbi from Nazareth take charge and throw people out, how dare he heal people and even teach people in the temple courts. Can you imagine some random preacher turning up here and taking it upon themselves to start preaching and teaching?

Of course, the chief priests and elders wanted to know what or who gave Jesus the authority to do what he was doing, and they had every right to question him. They go to Jesus and ask him.

Jesus says he will only reply if they first answer a question from him. The question he asks exposes their lack of both authority and integrity. He asks them if John’s baptism was from heaven or of human origin. In other words, was John a genuine prophet called by God into his ministry and authorised by God to baptise people and more importantly prepare the way for the Lamb of God, or was he merely another pretender?

The chief priests and scribes could have answered truthfully that they did not believe John was a genuine prophet and that he had no authority from God to preach or baptise. This would have been brave and dangerous because many people believed John was a true prophet, but it would have shown that they were honest and had integrity.

Unfortunately for the leaders of the temple they showed their true colours. Instead of being faithful followers of God, trusting in their Lord, they were guided by self-interest and were prepared to compromise the truth to secure their own popularity. Instead of admitting that they did not believe John’s baptism was from God they lied and said, “We don’t know.”

Jesus sticks to his word and refuses to tell them by what authority he is acting.

Then Jesus tells a parable about authority. In the parable, a father asks two of his sons to work in his vineyard. The first son openly rejects his father’s authority and refuses to go to work in the vineyard when he is asked. The second son lies and says he will go and work in the vineyard but then rejects the father’s authority and doesn’t go.

We probably all know people like the second son. Children can be like that at times can’t they? We ask our child to go and tidy up their room and off they go. Hours later we find them in their room totally distracted playing with their toys, reading a book or looking at their electronic device. And their room – well their room is still a mess. But it isn’t only children who are like that. Most of us know someone who has said they would do something and then they don’t do it.

It happens in our own lives too. We say we are going to do something, and we end up not doing it. Sometimes it is not a big thing, and it doesn’t really matter, but other times it can have a very negative impact on our life and on the lives of the people around us. The apostle Paul talks about this in Romans chapter 7, when he says, “*I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing”* (vs 19, NIV).

What is worse though is when you say you are going to do one thing knowing that you fully intend not to do it at all. These are the people God becomes very upset with. The hypocrites, the people who pretend to be righteous and perfect keepers of God’s laws but in reality are full of self-interest no matter who it hurts. The scribes and chief priests appear to be these kinds of people and if they don’t change, they will eventually reap the consequences of their disobedience.

There may be a bit of this kind of person inside us as well. Perhaps when we hear God speaking to us in the Lord’s prayer when we pray, “as we forgive those who sin against us” and deep down we know there are some people we can’t forgive and we don’t want to forgive.

Then there are those people who are like the first brother. Remember, when his father asked him to go and work in the vineyard and he said, “I will not.” But then he changed his mind, and he went. He had a change of mind and accepted his father’s authority.

Jesus often uses exaggeration to make his point. He could have drawn attention to the many ordinary people in the temple who believed John the Baptist was a prophet with authority from God. Instead, he picked out those whom most people at the time would have expected to be the last people to get into God’s kingdom. By doing this he also magnified the power of a change of heart and of faith in the Christ.

Jesus chooses to mention the tax collectors and the prostitutes who believed in John and believing in John also believed in Jesus whom John had pointed out as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus mentions these people who many would expect to be the least likely to enter God’s kingdom and says that they will enter the kingdom before the temple leaders.

By using exaggeration, Jesus is holding up a beacon of hope to those people who seem to have the least chance of entering God’s kingdom and if they can get in then no one is beyond hope. All who believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God and Jesus is the ultimate authority in the universe, will be at the front of the line entering God’s kingdom and living eternally with Jesus. Even the hypocrites and even those who rely on their own righteousness, even those of us who struggle to live lives of forgiving love, because we too at any time can change our minds, that is repent and look to Jesus for our strength and our salvation. Amen.

Pastor Rolf Lungwitz