

Yr. A, Proper 21
September 27, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1293 Words

Lessons: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm 25:1-8
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus, the Galilean, showed up at the Temple, it was just shy of a thousand *years* since the Glory of God had shown up, descending as a heavenly cloud, and filling the Temple.¹ On the day of the temple dedication around 950 B.C. there was not a single doubt that the Almighty God had taken up residence.

Well, the only way to approach *the most holy* God of heaven was with the most holy people on earth. And by the time Jesus showed up at the temple, there was a very clear and accepted definition for holiness. It was this: unblemished male offspring of priestly families.

Being a priest was like being a prince—you had to be born into it. There were no carpenter's sons permitted anywhere near the high altars. There were no backcountry boys from Nazareth welcomed anywhere near the inner sanctum where priests and Levites did their proper work each day.

For most priests, the question of authority had been settled *generations ago*. Tradition can be such a convenient tool for those who enjoy the power that comes from a special status.

The thing missing from today's Gospel lesson is what happened the day before. Jesus had entered the outer courtyard of the temple—where everyone is welcome, even gentiles. And he turned the place upside down.

Have you ever felt righteous anger? So did Jesus! He launched a protest in the wrong place at the wrong time—overturning tables, scattering the sacrificial doves, and chasing out the money changers. It's a miracle he made it out of there alive just days before Passover.

Having fled the City of Jerusalem for the relative safety of nearby Bethany, he's now back at it again. In today's Gospel lesson Jesus returns to the temple—this time with a new confrontation. Now Jesus takes on the chief priests and the elders.

Do you pay attention to people like that—people who upset the established and accepted order of things... people who challenge authority? It depends, doesn't it?

If we believe in Jesus, we can go along with it, even if his penchant for conflict makes us uncomfortable. Yet, if it is someone we don't know and conflict makes us uncomfortable, then we will more likely take sides with the authorities. Tradition can be such a convenient tool for those who enjoy the power of status.

Quite naturally, these chief priests and elders defend their power and status by confronting Jesus. "Who gave *you* the authority to speak and act out in this temple compound (of ours)?"

Like a wise rabbi, Jesus answers their question *with a question*. He asks them about John the Baptist—was *his authority* legitimate or not, was it from heaven or was it of human origin?

This is an important question, for two reasons *besides the ones* which the priests and elders fretted about. You see, John was like them. He was also the son of a priest. Yet, he ended up as an outsider—a prophet speaking and acting on the margins far from Jerusalem, in ways which challenged the religious and political elite profoundly.

¹ 1st Kings 8:10-13

Why did John not take advantage of the power and status available to him from the priesthood of his father? Why did John refer to the religious and political elites who came down to the Jordan riverside as a brood of vipers? Jesus knew there was no one quite like John to provoke a reaction from these guys dressed in soft robes.

The second reason Jesus' question is important is because it foreshadows his own fate. Remember, John was already dead, and for *only one reason*—because he challenged authority. John the Baptist directly confronted the power and status of Herod Antipas, and he was assassinated for it. Jesus already knows he will pay the ultimate price for upsetting the established order in the Temple of God, and for challenging the power and status of the authorities who oversee that order.

I do not believe it was the will of God for Jesus to die a violent death. I believe it was the will of sinful leaders who would rather kill the Son of God than lose their power and status. You see, the will of God is compassion and love. The will of selfish people is ambition and conceit.

Jesus speaks with divine compassion and mercy when he infers that the priests and elders will get to enter the Kingdom of God after all; they need only to get in line...behind the sultry prostitutes and the cheating tax collectors. Each group—the priests and elders, the prostitutes, and the tax collectors—they all had sold out to the Romans in various ways. The difference was how willing they were to listen (and respond) to the honest, challenging prophesy of John the Baptist.

Although today's Gospel lesson was written about the religious people in charge at the Temple, it still translates easily for those of us who consider ourselves to be religious people. Who is our John the Baptist? Who is challenging us to change our minds about our power and status? And who is embodying the challenging call of Jesus? Who is inviting us to get in line *behind* the people we assume to be beneath our status?

One of the people who set a memorable example for changing one's mind and changing one's ways is St. Paul. Today's lesson from his letter to the Philippians offers one of the clearest distinctions in Holy Scripture between the will of God and the will of people—the way of Jesus Christ and the way of selfish ambition and conceit.

In this morning's epistle reading, Paul challenges us to adopt the mentality of Christ, who had the full authority, power, and status of God at his fingertips; and *still* chose not to exploit it for himself. Instead, he chose humility, even to the point of torture, and death. Hard to believe, isn't it?

The One who *perfectly* embodies compassion and love in this world has shown *us* how to think, speak, and act faithfully. We are able to do it by becoming imitators, not impersonators. You see, an imitator genuinely seeks to replicate another's character; an impersonator just wants to look like it.

Paul concludes his challenging invitation to work out your own salvation with this new and powerful idea: "It is (none other than) God who is at work in you," Paul writes, "enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." In other words, our own bodies are the temples of God's presence. There is no doubt in Paul's mind that the glory of God has taken up residence in you and me.

So, the Good News is that we do not have to go searching somewhere else for our authority or power or status. We don't need to employ selfish ambition or conceit to get what we need. We simply need to accept the gift we have already received—the mind of Christ...the compassion of Christ...the love of Christ. Just *let it be*....within you.

So as it turns out, the established order of things in God's temple is not reinforced by some external authority or power or status. The order of things in God's temple is maintained *internally*. God is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work. This is the mentality of Christ that you are free to adopt at any time. This is what your soul needs to remember most of all.

The refrain from the prayer of the Psalmist which we sang this morning ends up being the perfect, challenging invitation for us as well—"Remember your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting."

Amen.