

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 16 (27 September)

Matthew 21:23-32

[to get an overview, also read Ezekiel 18:1-4 + 25-end & Philippians 2:1-13]

'Obeying authority', a theme which resonates through all of the readings set for today – and is clear in Matthew's gospel – is a subject that is being tested much in our modern-day society at this time. The "Coronavirus" situation continues to throw up many challenges, and is keeping the governments of our world on high alert for whatever the next phase may look like and evolve into. To counter-act the seemingly relentless onslaught of the virus, these same authorities are constantly tweaking the rules, changing the laws, and adapting enforcement. The ever-evolving picture challenges all of us at this time.

Obeying the rules is what is expected of us – and respecting the root of those laws is paramount to their success. We are obliged to put to one side our political opinions of the characters involved, and listen to and act upon the instructions that they issue. We are told they are for our well-being; we sincerely hope they are. "Do this", "Don't do that", "Please", "Or else". The language of the moment is rich in melodrama, hope and threat. Our reaction to it all will dictate where the future lies, for us as individuals and collectively for society at large.

Questioning authority will be quite a challenge at the moment. Tempers are frayed. People are fed up. Law-makers are exasperated. Law-enforcers are overworked. The army is on standby. The neighbours are asked to spy on us. It is all becoming exhausting, to say the least. Who is the ultimate authority? Whose laws should we follow? Which rules actually apply to me, you or us? Clarity is something we are all yearning for in these uncertain times.

"By what authority do you do what you are doing?" the supposed leaders ask of Jesus. Who said you could say that about God; who said you could heal that sick person on the Sabbath; who said you could be a leader and teacher? Who gave you your status? We are those with status – where on earth does yours come from? Well, it comes from Heaven, actually, but Jesus was not going to give them the pleasure of knowing that quite so easily. If they had truly recognised Him for who He was, they would have no need to even think the question, let alone ask it.

And the authority of Matthew is not giving it away, either. 'You want clarity, it says, you must seek it. Look at yourselves for the answer, don't throw your accusatory voice at me.' Jesus, argumentative as always, pushes them into a bit of a corner – He knew the climate of the day was still reeling from the controversy surrounding John the Baptist's death and the teachings that preceded such. He knew how they felt. Whose authority caused that? Whose authority lay at the root of the teaching? Was it God or man? Was John the Baptist valid as a prophet or as a mere storyteller? What was the basis of the authority they had used to disclaim his ministry?

And so a 'fudge' ensues. As leaders, they must be seen to hold the high ground, as they perceive that to be, yet they are conscious of the feelings around and amongst them. Was God involved? Were others to blame? Who even was John the Baptist? Was this a trick question! Like all

skilled politicians, they went for waffle and deflection: 'we do not know, they say. We cannot answer you. We couldn't possibly comment.' No – well neither could Jesus, and that seemed to be that.

Discerning true authority is probably not the easiest of actions. We hope the "Covid" rules are the correct ones to have. We hope their inventors and applicers are acting in our best interests. We hope all will lead to a sound and safe outcome. We hope all will be well for everyone. The authority that lay at the root is deemed to be the best it can possibly be for the greatest possible outcome. That has to be the perfect goal for all involved. But, how to achieve such?

The parable that follows, with its contrasting sons of the vineyard owner tries to guide us. One is asked to help out with the workload, initially saying "no", but then relents. The other, no doubt to appease his father, says, "Of course I will", and goes off elsewhere. One ultimately obeys, the other declines. We have no knowledge of the outcome of their actions: did the harvest come in in time, despite a lack of manpower? Did the father seek retribution for the wayward son? What happened between the brothers? Did the second son's actions trigger any long-term impact? Who knows – but what we do know is how attitude to authority impacts upon outcome and appearance. If all followed the first son, however reluctantly, the harvest is successful; if everyone followed the second, chaos and failure is more likely. If the "Covid" rules – however irritating or ludicrous they may seem – are ignored, the virus will spread and kill, be in no doubt about that; if they are followed, however inconvenient it may feel, then relief is potentially manifest. Stark choice. Stark reality. The authority is there, we just need to discern validity and desire to accept.

Jesus chooses to link two of the society's least acceptable social classes to the ultimate success of John the Baptist's work. He chooses to link the least obvious to the more redeeming. He chooses to suggest that the answer we want may not be the answer we get. Being mindful, being aware, being alert are factors that should play the more significant part than merely allowing preconceived notions to dominate. Why should I leave the pub at 10.00pm? Why should I wear a mask in the supermarket? Why should I stay away from my elderly relatives if I'm self-isolating? Why can't I join that group of seven friends? Why indeed. The authority may, in part, seem ridiculous, it may have been delivered haphazardly, it may even prove useless. Who knows? But think it through; discern, reflect, review. Look through it all to the scripture, and realise what is right, best, and ultimately relevant to the good order of society, life, and our own well-being.

Fr. Ian