

Proper 21A

St Mark's, Tampa

28 September 2008

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“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?’”

Well, what things? There's a lot that's happened between last week's reading and this week's reading. I guess the people who put the lectionary together thought it was really important to group the three parables about vineyards together – we had one last week, and there's another one next week – but that does sort of leave us in the dark about what on earth the chief priests and the elders are challenging Jesus about.

Since last week's Gospel, Jesus has been doing some big and dramatic things. In front of a big crowd he healed two blind men on the way to Jericho. In front of an even bigger crowd he had a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with palm branches waving and shouts of Hosanna. And then he went into the temple and drove out the moneychangers, and he healed the blind and the lame.

And *that's* what the chief priests and the elders are challenging Jesus about. Jesus has returned to the temple after spending the night in Bethany with his friends, and the chief priests and the elders go out to confront him – and make no mistake, this is not a chance encounter. As Matthew tells the story, this is a deliberate confrontation. “By what authority are you doing these things? By what authority are you healing? By what authority are you entering Jerusalem in a style that looks suspiciously like the fulfillment of prophecy? By what authority are you accepting the accolades of the crowds? By what authority are you interfering with the business of the temple? By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you that authority?”

In other words, just who do you think you are? You are not a priest, you are not an elder, you have no religious standing to do these things, you have no political standing to do these things – so show us your credentials, and tell us where you got them.

Now put yourself in Jesus' place. What do you do when someone says “Who do you think you are?” *You tell them.* At least you do if you have a good answer. And who could have a better answer than Jesus?

But Jesus is not going to play this game. He's not exactly insecure in who he is; he doesn't feel the need to produce his credentials. Instead, as he so often does, he answers their question with another question:

"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?"

Well, the chief priests and elders may be unbelievers, but they're not stupid. They know this is a trap:

"If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

So they duck the question. They won't say – and so Jesus tells them that he won't answer their question either.

He won't answer their question – but he *will* tell them a parable. And clearly the parable is supposed to have *something* to do with the topic of Jesus' authority. Jesus is not just pulling out some random story. But it's hard to see what the parable has to do with the topic at hand. I think the key to understanding this passage is understanding that connection. But to get that, we have to think about the parable a bit.

A man has two sons. He goes to the first son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. Notice – he doesn't *ask* him, he *tells* him. And he doesn't say "when you get around to it" or "some time when it's convenient" he says "today."

And the son just flat-out refuses. "I will not." Sons just didn't talk to their fathers like that back in those days. This kid is a horrible, horrible kid, a disrespectful, back-talking rebel.

But then he changes his mind. We don't know why. It doesn't matter why. What matters is that he changes his mind – the Greek can also be translated, "he repented" – and he goes out and works in the vineyard anyway.

Then there's the second son. Unlike the first son, the second son is a nice, respectful boy. Look at how he addresses his father: "I go, sir." The word for 'sir' is the same as the word for 'Lord' – that's pretty respectful. "Anything you say, Dad." "Whatever you want, Lord." Now *that's* how you're supposed to talk to your father.

But he doesn't go. Maybe he never intended to go. Maybe he intended to go, but then something more enjoyable came up and he decided not to bother. It doesn't matter what he intended. What matters is that he doesn't do as he was told, despite his very respectful language.

And now Jesus asks his challengers which of the two sons did the will of his father. That's *easy*. As parables go, this one's not exactly a head-scratcher. The second son didn't *do* anything. Obviously it was the *first* son who did the will of his father.

Good answer, chief priests and elders. Only problem is – your good answer is just words. The right words, but you've just agreed that words don't matter. It's what we *do* that matters. And though you've given the right answer, you haven't done the right deeds. You're the second son. You're very good at saying, "I go, sir" – "Whatever you say, Lord" – but the action isn't there.

You know who's good at the action part? Tax collectors and prostitutes. John the Baptist preached to them, and they believed him. *They changed their minds*, just like the first son. You people didn't believe him, and even when you saw the tax collectors and prostitutes repenting, you still didn't believe.

Now notice what Jesus has done here, because there's a lot packed into this exchange. First of all, Jesus has answered the John the Baptist question that the chief priests and the elders were too chicken to answer. He is quite clear that John came "in the way of righteousness." John's authority was from God.

And second, this means that Jesus has now caught them in exactly the trap that they thought they were cleverly avoiding. They can't deny Jesus' application of the parable without denying that John the Baptist had his authority from God. They don't dare admit to being the second son – as Jesus has said – but they can't even pretend to be the first son, because that would mean they'd have to admit they were merely paying lip service to the will of the Father and need to change their minds and get busy. So they're stuck. I highly recommend that you not try to outsmart Jesus.

But how is any of this relevant to the original challenge? What does the parable of the two sons have to do with the authority of Jesus to heal, to cleanse the temple, to fulfill prophecy, to accept the praises of the crowds?

The chief priests and the elders can't see it, of course, but we know who Jesus is. He's the Lord, as in the parable – the one who sends us out to do the work he has given us to do, to work in the vineyard, working out our own salvation with fear and trembling. But he does not exercise his Lordship by domination, or by flaunting the authority that is his by right. He is not someone who finds it necessary to show his credentials when someone asks "Who do you think you are?" For

though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

So he is the master, the Lord; but he is also the Son who does the will of the Father – a perfect Son, who not only says the right words, but carries them out:

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Unlike the chief priests and the elders, we know who Jesus is. We know what he has done, and we know by what authority he has done it. We know, too, what he asks us to do. Sometimes we say "Yes, Lord," but don't follow through. Sometimes we just say no. But always, always, we can change our minds. We can give up our titles and reputations, we can stop standing on our own ridiculous dignity, we can stop producing our flimsy credentials, and go into the vineyard and get busy with obedience. By his grace we can do the will of the Son who does the will of the Father, the will of the one who became obedient even unto death, even death on a cross.

What is the Lord of the vineyard telling you to do? What work does he have for you? Is there a grudge that he is telling you to let go of? An offense that he is telling you to forgive? A cross that he is commanding you to bear? A joy that he does not want you to miss? A love that he is urging you to share?

Say yes. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, at whose name may every knee bend, and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.