

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 27th September 2020 – Trinity 16

Ezekiel 18.1-4,25-end; Psalm 25.1-8; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32

By what authority? By what authority do you say this and do that? What gives YOU the right? Why should we have any respect what YOU say? Such questions abound today amidst a growing second wave of the Coronavirus. New restrictions are greeted with derision and irritation. Increasing numbers of people express their anger in denial, by disbelieving those in authority. And conspiracy theories abound.

Many conspiracy theories are eye-poppingly ridiculous and bear scant relation to the real world, and one wonders how on earth people can come to believe them. Why they are so unwilling to believe those who have the authority of relevant knowledge and experience? The answer is that these conspiracy theories are not really the result of a process of logical thinking. Clearly they are not so! They are rather an expression of deep feelings: anger, fear, and serious disappointment with those in power.

Of course, as people of faith, we perhaps need to tread carefully here. People beliefs do express who they really are. Also, there are many today who regard Christian beliefs as ridiculous. However the thing about a mature and sophisticated tradition of faith like Christianity, is that the feelings that Christian beliefs reflect are not incoherent feelings that have not been processed. They reflect universal human feelings about the most vital things in people's lives. Moreover the logical framework of Christian belief has been very deeply explored, tested and refined for generations. Thus the beliefs of Christianity are those that have stood the test of time, and indeed they do have the authority both of knowledge and experience.

When he is challenged by the authorities in the temple in our Gospel reading today, Jesus knows that he is the one with real knowledge and experience of God. He accuses the temple authorities of following a system of rules they do not really understand or indeed follow. So he ties them in knots, and effortlessly sidesteps their trick questions with a similar ones of his own. Essentially he is saying to them, "That, my friends, is the wrong question." What Jesus wants everyone to do is look far more into the heart of things, and see where God is doing a new thing. The question that Jesus wants us to ask is, "What is God doing here and now?"

Then in the parable of the disobedient sons, Jesus is comparing the temple authorities to the son who sounds obedient but isn't actually in practice. By contrast and to their shame, even those they regard as the dregs of society, are getting the message of new life in the Kingdom of God and finding new hope and freedom. The message is that asking rule-bound questions about authority doesn't really get you anywhere, rather the important thing is to pay attention to the new life of the Kingdom of God, and how it is transforming people lives. And the main way to do this is to pay attention to Jesus himself.

ST MARY-LE-TOWER CHURCH IPSWICH

Amid all the new and coming Coronavirus restrictions on normal life; amid all the various kinds of loss, Christians need to be asking what now are the new things that God is doing here? Where is the Kingdom of God in the present situation? It is actually pretty obvious. We are being called to think rather less of ourselves as individuals with all sorts of rights, and more of ourselves as members of communities with a duties of care for one another. That is one of the essential aspects of the Kingdom of God.

So we should follow the Government's Coronavirus rules, not because we like them, but because they are the best current expression that we have, to care for one another and protect one another. The pandemic is a fast moving situation and the rules are inevitably messy. But the right questions to ask are not about the authority or otherwise of the rules. The right questions are not even about how well or badly those in power are managing the situation. The right question is not how can I best protect myself. The right question for us all is, how can I best protect and care for those around me.

What is God doing amid this crisis? Where is the Kingdom of God to be found amid the Coronavirus pandemic? It's not really any different from the usual. He is working to call us away from excessive individualism, where "I want" and "I choose" are the most important things in life, to a recognition that what really matters, is how we care for those in the communities we are part of. Fretting about the rules is actually a distraction. What we really need to do is get on with the caring.

In the Bible, vineyards are often symbols of the places where God is working to bring forth good fruit. In the parable, the sons are being asked to go and work with God in the vineyard. The first son is initially not impressed by the invitation to work in this vineyard, he'd rather do his own thing. But later he goes to work there because he has recognised that it is the best thing to do.

Now, in our time, the way to get through this difficult winter is not to fret about the rules, but to care for one another. This is where God's vineyard is. This is where the Kingdom of God is to be found. This is where the new life of the Kingdom of God will be found, in the life of the Church, in our families, and in our communities. Amen.

CJ. 27.09.20