

Repentance, Commitment and God's Grace

There is an old Jewish witticism in which someone asks his rabbi, "Why do rabbis always answer a question with another question?" to which the rabbi replied, "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?"

Judaism is a religion of questions. In Judaism, to be without questions is not a sign of faith, but of lack of depth. ("The Jewish Course of Why: The Art of Asking Questions," Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute, myjli.com)

When the chief priests and elders challenge Jesus' teaching and the source of his authority, Jesus answers their question with his own, questioning their integrity, awaiting their response about the baptism of his cousin John ~ who authorized it? Heaven or humans? ("Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John," holytextures.com, 2023)

Again, our Gospel story begins in the middle of a chapter and requires framing.

It is the end of Jesus' ministry, and he knows his time is short. He and his followers have made a pilgrimage from Galilee in the north, where most of them live, down to Jerusalem for the annual festival of Passover. He rides a donkey into the city with his followers welcoming him, waving branches, and shouting praise.

He goes straight to the Temple and takes great offence at the men profiting from the spiritual needs of the people. He drives out those buying and selling animals. He overthrows tables and benches and sends those doing business out into the streets.

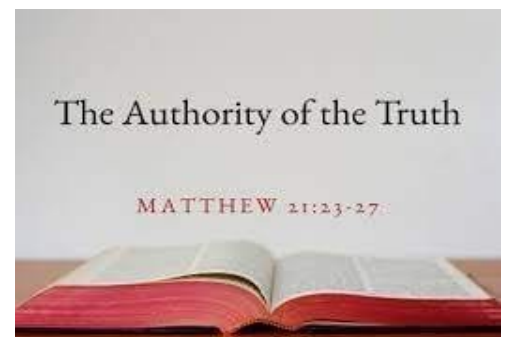
While at the temple, Jesus heals some blind and lame people who come to Him for help. Some children see this and begin to repeat the praises of the crowds when Jesus rode into town. This angers the chief priests and scribes. They believe Jesus should discourage the children but the children understand what the leaders do not ~ that "Jesus is their promised Saviour in God's kingdom that even the most learned rabbis fail to grasp. Children are not blinded by pride and hypocrisy and are better able to perceive spiritual truth." (adapted from gotquestions.org)

Jesus leaves and spends the night in Bethany, and the next morning, on his way back to the Temple, Jesus relates the parable of the fig tree, which is another message to the Jewish leaders, exposing their hypocrisy ~ devout in lip-service only. They do not love God from their heart. The chief priests and elders are trying to find ways to persecute Jesus because He has been exposing their sinful actions and false piety. (from "Parables of the Fig Tree Life Lessons", findinggodamongus.com and bibleref.com)

Today's Gospel passage begins with their confronting Jesus when he returns to the Temple. The leaders do not hide the fact that they despise his cousin, John, the Baptist.

Both Jesus and John were itinerant ministers; neither was a rabbi and neither held formal Jewish authority. Their authority came directly from God.

John preached repentance and invited people to be baptized in the river Jordan. He was believed to be a prophet sent by God by those who were at the lowest rung of society ~ the "wrong" crowd ~ the marginalized ~ those who were ignored by the religious leaders ~ people like tax collectors and prostitutes.



When Jesus questions the authority of the Jewish leaders they were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they said that God himself had authorized John, Jesus would justly accuse them of not following John's heavenly teachings; and if they answered "of human origin," they were afraid of the reaction of the crowds because they knew the people believed that John was a prophet sent by God.

The cowardly Jewish leaders didn't want to have anyone upset with them and so they answered Jesus with, "We don't know," and Jesus replied, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." (portions above adapted from Matthew 21:23-32 Commentary by Scott Hoezee, 2017, cepreaching.org)

Jesus is not finished with the Temple leaders and relates a parable to illustrate his position. It's about a father, his two sons, and an invitation to commitment.

The man speaks to his sons separately. The first son refuses to work in the vineyard for his father, but later changes his mind and obeys. When the man issues the same invitation to his second son, the young man immediately agrees to work but fails to keep his promise.



We might quickly judge the action ~ or non-action ~ by the sons such as thinking the proverbial "Actions speak louder than words!" or "Obey your father!" but we would be missing the message and how it relates to the religious leaders of Jesus' time and us.

Jesus had the temple leaders pegged as the ones who said they would work in the vineyard, but then didn't! But when John preached his message, hundreds of so-called "sinners" ~ like the tax collectors and prostitutes ~ had listened, and believed, and changed their lives. They were like the son who at first had refused to work in the vineyard, but had then repented and done what his father asked.

Here is a basic truth about human behaviour: we are quick to nod our heads, agreeing with God, saying "Yes," to things and then failing to do so. We're also very adept at ignoring what God wants us to do. Too frequently, we're really good at saying, "No" to God, just like the son in the parable.

The truth that this parable proffers has nothing to do with the first son's hesitation and everything to do with the fact that in the end, he showed up. God is always extending an invitation to us. (adapted from "Questions and Answers" by Marshall A. Jolly, October 1, 2023, episcopalchurch.org)

He wants us to actually roll up our sleeves and get busy working in His vineyard. We are to love God with all that is in us and pleasing to Him. We are to practise what Jesus preached.

God has given us free will to choose. "The beauty...of God's love and mercy is that no matter how many times we've said "No," God is always pleased when we turn to Him with a "Yes'." He will never turn down a "Yes'!" He will never throw your previous "No" in your face or hold it against you. We are never too far lost to turn our "No" into a "Yes." (from "The Parable of Two Sons," findinggodamongus.com)

God is never finished with us. Although we might wish for God to say to us, "Okay, you've gone far enough; you can retire now and spend the rest of your days ensuring that the back pew doesn't float away," the truth is that we must continue saying "Yes." In order to live into God's invitation, we must be willing to leave the past behind - and turn toward the future. There's more kingdom to build, and God has put out the call to all who dare to join. (adapted from "Questions and Answers" by Marshall A. Jolly, October 1, 2023, episcopalchurch.org)

God is looking for people like you and me. Ordinary people. People who have the courage, honesty, and humility to admit they've messed up with free will. God is looking for people who have said "No" and have turned their lives around and embraced His grace, forgiveness, and love. God gives us a promise: He is always there, waiting for us, whenever we decide we're ready to be found and join Him in the vineyard.

You have been listening to one such person.
Amen.