

Matthew 21: 23-32

Heavenly Father, would you be in the words of my mouth now and in all of our hearts, Lord, I pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

By what authority are you doing these things? Words from our gospel reading today. It's a question. And perhaps a question is a good place for us to begin. Because as I say this afternoon, we were going to be thinking about curiosity. About wondering, exploring, asking questions and being open to discovering something we hadn't seen before.

Jesus knew quite a lot about questions. We often think of Jesus as a wonderful storyteller, and rightly so, but Jesus was also a brilliant question master. Again and again in the Gospels, people asked Jesus questions, and quite often Jesus responds by asking another question.

That's exactly what happens here. The chief priests and elders approach Jesus while he is teaching in the temple. By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority? Now we need to remember where we are in Matthew's story.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem, the crowds have welcomed him, he's overturned the tables in the temple, and he's been teaching and healing. And the cross is drawing closer. So this isn't simply a friendly theological discussion. The authorities are challenging Jesus. Who do you think you are? Who gave you permission to do this?

And Jesus responds, "I will also ask you a question." He asked them about John the Baptist. Did John's baptism come from heaven or was it of human origin? Suddenly the people questioning Jesus are themselves being questioned. And notice what happens. The chief priests and the elders don't seem to ask what is true.

Instead, they ask, what is the safest answer for us to give? If we say John's authority

came from heaven, Jesus will ask why we didn't believe him. But if we say it was merely human, what will the crowds think? So the answer, we don't know. And perhaps this tells us something important about curiosity.

The problem isn't that they ask Jesus a question. Jesus asks questions too. The problem is that they are not genuinely open to where the answer might take them. They've something to protect. And genuine curiosity requires something different. It requires humility.

The humility to say, "Maybe I don't know. Maybe I don't understand. Maybe this person I've dismissed has something to teach me. Maybe God is at work somewhere I hadn't thought to look. Perhaps even, maybe I could be wrong." And then Jesus tells them a story. A father has two sons. He says to the first son, "Go and work in the vineyard today." The son says, "No,

But later he changes his mind and goes. The father asks the second son the same thing. This one gives the right answer, yes sir, I'll go. Except he doesn't. So Jesus asks, which of the two did the will of his father? Now the answer's obvious, the first. But there is a simple but challenging truth here. There can be a gap between the faith we profess and the faith we practice. We can talk about compassion, but are we compassionate? We can talk about community, but who actually feels that they belong? We can preach about welcome, but who actually finds a place at the table? We can say yes, Lord, on a Sunday morning, and somehow never quite make it into the vineyard on a Monday. We can't simply talk the talk.

We have to walk the walk. But there's something wonderfully hopeful about that first son. He changes his mind. The first answer is not his final answer. He gets it wrong. He says no, but his no doesn't have to define him. Something changes. He thinks again and then he gets up and he goes.

Perhaps that's one of the signs of a living faith, the capacity to be changed, to be able

to say, I used to think that, but now I see things differently. I hadn't understood, I hadn't listened, I was wrong. Those can be difficult words to say, but perhaps they can also be holy words because they leave room for God to do something new within us.

And that's very close to what Christians mean by repentance. Repentance is not simply feeling guilty. It's turning around. A change of heart and mind that becomes a change of direction. The first son doesn't simply sit at home regretting his answer. He gets up and he goes into the vineyard. He changes his mind because of a change in his life.

And then Jesus makes the story uncomfortable. He tells these respectable religious leaders, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into God's kingdom ahead of them. These were people whom respectable society had pushed to the edges. People whom others might simply and easily have written off.

And Jesus says, in effect, look again. They listened to John. They responded. Their lives changed. God is at work among people. God is at work among people you had already dismissed. So perhaps we need to ask, where might God be at work that we hadn't noticed?

We expect to encounter God here in worship, in scripture, through prayer and sacrament, and we do. But the life of God isn't confined to the places where we expect to find it. God may meet us around a lunch table, in a community centre, in warm space, through music or art, in a conversation with somebody whose life is very different from ours, in the person who walks through the church door and doesn't know when to sit or when to stand. Perhaps our task then isn't always to take God somewhere. Sometimes it's to discover that God has arrived before us and that requires curiosity. It requires us to listen and to ask, "God, what are you doing here?"

And our readings from Philippians today takes us a little deeper. Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." And what sort of mind do we see in

Christ? One shaped by humility. Christ does not cling to status. He empties himself. He takes the form of a servant. He gives himself in love.

And then Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you." That last part matters because otherwise today's gospel could simply become, "Try harder, do better, be a better Christian." But that's not the gospel. We don't walk the walk to persuade God to love us. God is already at work within us.

The Spirit continues to question us, challenge us and change us, encouraging us to change along the way. Our part is to remain open to that work of God within our hearts. So perhaps this morning we can take away three questions. What questions am I still willing to ask?

Not simply questions which confirm what I already believe, but questions to which I'm genuinely prepared to hear an unexpected answer. Where might God be asking me to change my mind? About another person? About myself? About something I have always assumed? And finally, what am I actually going to do?

Because the father doesn't ask which son gave the best answer. He asked them to go into the vineyard. Our faith becomes visible in how we live, how we love, how we welcome, how we forgive and how we serve. The wonderful thing about that first son is that his first answer was not his final answer.

And neither does ours have to be. God is still at work in us. So may we remain curious enough to ask questions this morning. Humble enough to hear unexpected answers. Courageous enough to change our minds. And faithful enough when Christ calls us to get up and go into the vineyard. Let us pray.

Loving God, give us curious minds, open hearts and the humility to listen. Give us courage to change, faith to follow where you lead and grace not simply to speak of your love, but to live it. In Jesus's name. Amen.