Obedience **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 27th September 2026

Reading(s): Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32, **Matthew 21:23-32**

Year A, Proper 21

Introduction: an embarrassing mistake

As an elderly woman arrived at church and the usher asked her where she would like to sit. She replied "On the front row please."

The usher quietly said "I wouldn't sit in the front if I were you: the preacher is really boring."

She asked sternly "Do you know who I am?"

"No, I don't" said the usher.

"Well," said the lady, "I'm that preacher's mother!"

"Ah!" said the usher. "Do you know who I am?"

"No," said the preacher's mother.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed the usher.

The usher in this little story commits a massive *faux pas* because he doesn't know the identity of the lady. In our reading from the gospel of Matthew, the chief priests and scribes don't recognize who Jesus is – or who John the Baptist was either.

Jesus in Jerusalem

The chapter begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, in fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah about the

coming Messiah. Many in the crowd recognise Jesus as the Messiah, and the children are running around the Temple shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David." Then Jesus goes into the Temple courts and starts clearing out the market in sacrificial animals and the money-changers who went with this, who profited from the fact that you had to use special Temple money to buy an animal. Matthew writes that all of this made the chief priests and scribes very angry, and so at the beginning of today's reading we read that:

> When he 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, and who gave you this authority?"[1]

Jesus is under fire. The religious leaders are challenging him to account for his actions. After all, Jesus has not consulted *them* about entering the city as if he was the Messiah. He didn't go through the proper channels to raise an objection about the commercial activities in the Temple. He seems to be a law unto himself. Who does he think he is? And what right does he have to start quoting prophecy to justify overturning tables in the holy place?

Jesus turns the tables

Although it might seem as if Jesus is under pressure from the authorities, in fact it's the other way round. Jesus' actions are indeed extreme. He is throwing his weight around, choosing to enter the city on a donkey to fulfil a Messianic prophecy, and acting as if he has the authority to say what should or

[1] Matthew 21:23 NRSV

shouldn't happen in the Temple. His actions are a challenge to the religious establishment. They think authority rests with them. But they have failed in their role as spiritual leaders of the people. And they're not willing to see that and recognise that Jesus is indeed the Chosen One, sent on a mission by God.

In response to their question about where his authority comes from, Jesus gives the kind of response that is his trademark: he asks *them* a 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?'[2]

Jesus is implying that he and John the Baptist are on the same team. And the hypocrisy of the religious leaders is exposed when they reply that they do not know: to admit that John was a messenger of God would undermine their own position; but they don't have the courage to deny John's authority, as they know that would make them really unpopular with the common people. This does really remind me of the way many politicians avoid answering straight questions, more concerned about getting on the wrong side of this or that group than about saying honestly what they believe.

Jesus then puts the religious leaders on the spot, by telling a simple story of a father and two sons, and then applying it to the contrast between the leaders and the people who followed John. The tax collectors and prostitutes – 2 classes of people who were considered the lowest of the low – are like

[2] Matthew 21:24-25 NRSV

the son who initially disobeyed his father, but later changed his mind and obeyed him. They listened to John and repented, and so were entering the Kingdom of Heaven. The religious leaders, on the other hand, were like the second son who said "yes" but didn't do the will of the Father. Even the sight of tax collectors and prostitutes changing their ways in response to John the Baptist didn't convince them that something amazing was happening and they needed to get with it.

Actions not words

The message of Jesus' parable is simple – God is not interested in words or appearances but in action. The first son blankly refuses to do what is father asks, which would have seemed even more shocking in Jesus' day than today. But he later changed his mind – the Greek word for this also means to regret or to repent – and went to work for his father.

Jesus was good at welcoming all kinds of people, including those others despised, like tax collectors and prostitutes. He had no prejudices, and treated everyone on equal terms. He did not judge by appearances, but had a knack of seeing what was really inside people – and drawing out of them the deepest longings, touching them at their deepest point of need – if they would only let him. Jesus was someone you could be yourself with – because people realised that whatever their faults, he would accept them, if they were willing to be honest with him. Jesus' message was about getting real with God. But some of the most religious people weren't willing to be honest with Jesus.

Bringing it home

So if there's anyone listening to this who feels that they're not worthy of God's love, or that they've messed up, or wandered off and lost the plot as far as God is concerned, there's hope: it's never too late to put things right with God. God is the God of the second chance. All down history people have found that God's grace and mercy are infinite, and he never writes us off. People can change – and God can change them. So no matter how much of a failure you may feel towards God, the door is always open.

But there's also a message of challenge here for some of us: don't be like the religious leaders who gave the appearance of being respectable, but who didn't obey God. The father in Jesus' parable asked his sons to work for him in the vineyard. What work does God have for you and me to do? Are we willing to make God's priorities our priorities? Are we willing to hand our lives over to him and submit to his authority over our lives?

It may be that some of us here today have been holding back from giving God what he deserves from our lives – maybe our time, our commitment, our money. Maybe he's been challenging us to deal with some issue in our lives, in our relationships, in our work, in our work-life balance – whatever it may be. We know what we should do, but are holding back from doing it, either through fear, or through selfishness or reluctance to let go. Are we willing to take some decisive action that is needed to do what God is asking us to do? We call ourselves Christians, but does it show in our lives? If you talk the talk, then you need to walk the walk.

Or perhaps you've been serving the Lord faithfully, but you're starting to grow weary of doing the right thing. Temptations to self-indulgence are beginning to get to you. Perhaps you've forgotten how much God has done for you, and you're afraid to trust him for the future.

The obedience of Jesus

Today the bread and wine on this table remind us of God's generosity to us – the gift of his own Son to be crucified for us, to reconcile us to God. The obedience of Jesus to his Father's will brought forgiveness and hope to us who have disobeyed God. Jesus did his Father's will, so that we also might learn to live like that. As Paul wrote,

> And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.[3]

By his grace and power we can start again, we can find new life and the strength to carry on in the right way.

What is God saying to you and to me today? It's not about appearances, it's not about the right words. Jesus knows what is in our hearts. Let's get real with God today.

[3] 2 Corinthians 5:15 NRSV