

Year A Proper 26 Matthew 21:23-32 Saying Yes to Jesus Doesn't Always Lead to Salvation

Today we hear the Jewish religious leaders ask Jesus where he gets the authority for his preaching and teaching and healing. It is important to know that, just the day before, was Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and having huge crowds spread palm branches on the ground before him, singing that he is the Messiah. Then Jesus had gone into the temple and flipped over the tables of the money changers and merchants and yelled at them to get out. He spent the rest of the day curing people in the temple while children sang hosannas to him...and the religious leaders were boiling mad.

Our story picks up the next morning when Jesus returns to the temple. The religious leaders, still angry, are ready to take him on and so they move in on him while he is teaching and they confront him. Basically, they ask Jesus, "Who do you think you are and what right do you have to walk into our temple and act like you own the place? Clearing out the money changers, teaching, healing...Who gave you the authority to do all this? Who gave you the authority to act like our Messiah?"

Jesus could simply answer by telling them straight out that his authority is from God but he knows they wouldn't believe him and would argue with him. Instead, Jesus asks them a question about John the Baptist's authority – where did John's authority come from? Was it from God or of human origin? If they answer that question then Jesus will answer their question.

Jesus knows this is a lose/lose situation for the religious leaders. If they say John's authority came from God then Jesus will ask them why they then did not believe John's teachings. If they say John's authority was human – that John was acting

on his own without God – then the crowd gathered around would be furious because the crowd believed John to be a prophet of God. To make matters even worse for the religious leaders, Jesus' authority was intertwined with John's authority because John was the prophet sent to proclaim and prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus knows this. That's why he asked that question in the first place. So, if they say John's authority is from God, they will be acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. If they say John's authority is of human origin...well, did I mention the crowd would be furious?

Knowing they cannot win, the religious leaders choose not to answer at all. "Suit yourself," Jesus says, "but I am not going to answer your question then either."

But...Jesus actually does answer the religious leaders in his story of the two sons. Not only does this story say that John's authority, and therefore Jesus' authority as well, is from God, Jesus also tells them their salvation is in danger.

The first son in the story is asked by his father to work in his vineyard. That son says no but then changes his mind and goes to work. The second son says yes to his father but then does not go to the vineyard to work. Neither son is perfect but clearly the first son is the one who ends up doing what his father wanted.

As soon as the religious leaders agree that the first son – the one who said no but then had a change of heart – is the son who did the will of his father, Jesus says to them, "But you guys are like the second son – the one who said yes but then didn't go to work."

Matthew is brilliant in his use of language. When the second son says, "I will go, sir," Matthew uses the word "kyrie" – "I will go, kyrie...I will go, Lord." Lord is not

the word a son would usually use to address his father but it is the same word Jesus uses earlier when explaining to his disciples that hearers of the word must be doers of the word. He says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ – Kyrie, Kyrie – will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

This is a message heard over and over again throughout the Gospel. It is not enough to say we love God – we must love God with a love that takes us over completely – our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength – and overflows in love for our neighbour as well.

By telling the religious leaders that they are like the second son, Jesus is saying that they are the ones crying, “Lord, lord,” wanting to get into the kingdom but who will be turned away because they have not done the will of the Father. The words professed by the lips of these religious leaders is not mirrored in their hearts. “That what we say with our lips, we may show forth in our lives,” are the familiar words many of us grew up praying.

In comparison to the religious leaders, Jesus holds up the tax collectors and the prostitutes as the ones who will enter the kingdom. These were the worst of the worst – they weren’t even allowed to set foot in the temple where the religious leaders could go. Being told that the tax collectors and prostitutes would not only enter the kingdom but enter ahead of them, would be a shock to the religious leaders. It would “hit them where it hurt” so to speak.

The tax collectors (those Jewish people who had turned against their own people in order to work for the Romans...traitors, in other words) – these tax collecting traitors and prostitutes were like the first son in Jesus’ story. They had said “No”

to the Father; they had turned their backs on his will – but then they had repented. They changed their minds when they heard John speak – they believed his message that the Messiah was coming and they believed that Jesus was that Messiah. They had turned their lives back to God, and had been baptized and, because of that, they were going to enter the kingdom of God.

But Jesus does not shut the door completely on the religious leaders. He doesn't say they will not be able to get into the kingdom at all. He says the tax collectors and prostitutes will go into the kingdom of God ahead of them. Jesus leaves the door open for the religious leaders to repent.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance and Jesus' proclamation, as he travelled to spread the good news, was to "Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand." Repentance was offered up to the religious leaders – to everyone, to us – as the way into the kingdom.

To repent means to "change your mind, reorient yourself." It does not mean simply to change your mind in the sense – I was going to watch tv but now I'm going to read a book instead and Jesus was not just asking people to feel badly for their wrong-doings. Jesus asks them and us to make a deep, inward change, a radical change toward God...to reorient our lives toward God. We are asked to love God with a deep and abiding love – a love that changes what **we** want into what **God** wants.

Those who truly hear the word will be doers of the word. Jesus spells it out plainly when he says he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison and we did not care for him. Confused, the people ask him "when did we see you

and not care for you?” Jesus answers that, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

Loving God with all that we are is half of what God wants. Loving our neighbour is the other half. Prayer and praise and worship is one half; rolling up our sleeves and working to fix our little corner of the world is the other half. These two halves work together and cannot be separated...loving God, participating in our liturgies forms us into the people who work with God to repair the brokenness of our world.

Yes, what God wants certainly is a lot of work but when we repent and believe – change our inner-most being, fill it with love and give ourselves over to the will of God then we cannot help but show forth in our lives what we profess with our lips.