

Year A Proper 26 Matthew 21 vv23 to 32

The proof is in the pudding. This is an old saying that means the value of something is determined by its outcomes. This is a valuable lesson that Jesus is teaching us – and the elders and chief priests, too, of course – but the “pudding” is not so easy to make as you may think. The “pudding” is our thinking and our actions that belong in God’s kingdom, that hasten the fullness of God’s kingdom and we are sometimes not as open to changing our thinking and behaviours as we may believe we are. Last week, we heard the story of the labourers in the vineyard – those who laboured long and hard receive the same pay as those who work only one hour and, despite the fact that those all-day labourers got the pay they’d agreed upon, our thoughts of, “That’s not fair!” come to mind and betray the depth to which we are immersed in the merit-based thinking of the world’s ways. Authority is one concept that is almost always linked with our merit-based thinking. The principal of the school has earned the title because of years of experience and other qualifications. The editor of the newsroom worked her way up to the position, earning her title through years of good work starting with sorting letters in the mailroom. Along with the various titles we give to people comes a level of authority. The greater the title, the greater the authority. I have certain authority in a parish and during our worship but Archbishop Anne has greater authority. If she were here, she would automatically be the presider and I would assist her where she directed me to assist her. Using authority is a form of power.

In our story today, we come across the chief priests and the elders of the people. Their titles give them authority and, along with that authority, they have power. Other than their Roman oppressors, no one has more power in Jewish society

than the chief priests and elders of the Temple. They, however, have a problem. Jesus has been given a title. Jesus has just caused an enormous stir – entering Jerusalem on a donkey, overturning tables in the temple, and the children in the temple are singing out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Son of David. That’s a title that has vastly more power and authority than the titles of chief priest and elder because “Son of David” means the Messiah – the long-expected, eagerly anticipated Messiah of God. Feeling very much threatened and in danger of losing their power as the crowds flock adoringly to Jesus, as they give to Jesus’ teachings their full attention in the Temple, the chief priests and the elders decide they must challenge Jesus’ authority. They must show to the people that they – the chief priests and elders – have more authority and power. Jesus must be stopped.

Jesus is on a mission of transformation. His purpose – to reconcile all creation to God – involves the ministry of healing, mending this broken world and its creatures, transforming them from brokenness into wholeness that only comes through right relationship with God, with neighbour, with planet. This is an ongoing transformation – one that we are participating in even now as we worship – but one that many people resist. Those with worldly power and authority like the world just the way it is. True power – God’s power – is love, welcome and inclusion, mercy, compassion, generosity – and that is frightening to those who value worldly power – position, property, and pocketbook. If these are the things you value, then when these are stripped away, there is nothing left. The ones with authority in society, the wealthy elite landowners, which includes the chief priests and the elders, did not want to be left with nothing.

They challenge Jesus about his power and authority. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" They are fully expecting Jesus to name a human teacher – perhaps Gamaliel, Paul's teacher, who we hear about in Acts. No human teacher is superior to the teachers in the Temple and so, eagerly waiting to shoot Jesus down, the chief priests and elders, instead, are thrown for a loop. Sure, I'll answer your question, Jesus tells them. But only if you first answer mine: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" This is indirect but Jesus is not avoiding their question. The same issue they have with John the Baptist is the issue they have with Jesus. Does his authority originate from God or is it human authority? The chief priests and the elders are in a pickle. "If we say, 'From heaven,' they reason, he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." They have lost their challenge. They grudgingly mumble, "We don't know" in response to Jesus' question and try to shrink into the background.

But Jesus won't let them out of the spotlight just yet. Jesus has exposed them – their desire to hold onto their worldly power is more important to them than speaking the truth. Their answer was purely political calculation to save their own skins. As they hastily gather up the shreds of their human power that Jesus has ripped apart, he hammers home his point with a parable.

It is the brief story of two sons. The first says he will not go to work in his father's vineyard but then changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard just as his father had asked. The second son obediently says 'yes' to his father but then he doesn't go to work. The story is simple to understand: the first son, the one who

goes to work in the vineyard, has done the will of his father. However, we may not fully appreciate the strong implications woven into the story as the chief priests, the elders, and the listening people would have done. Scripture is full of the stories of brothers – Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Aaron, David and his brothers, the Prodigal Son and his older brother. These stories are loaded with betrayal, jealousy, anger, struggles for power, and sometimes reconciliation. In today's parable, Jesus calls the sons "children" just as Israel is often named God's children. The vineyard is a "go-to" symbol in Jewish tradition for the land of Israel with God as the vineyard owner. Jesus is not simply asking his challengers to comment on two random, fictitious brothers but, rather, to place themselves within the foundational and ongoing story of God's relationship with his people.

The parable of the two sons illustrates for us that what we do is more important than what we say we are going to do. The chief priests and the elders have been unceremoniously dumped in the role of the second brother – saying the right thing but not following it up with doing the right thing. Before we get too comfortable pointing the finger at the chief priests and the elders – "that's right – what he said" – let's recall Mahatma Gandhi's blunt assessment: "I like your Christ," he says. "I do not like your Christians."

"Truly I tell you," Jesus declares to drive home his point, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Those people you look at as low-life sinners, less in power, less in importance, less in value, they are invited into the kingdom and, what's more, they're getting in ahead of you. Why? "Because John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not

believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” Jesus is on a mission of transformation. Transforming from brokenness into wholeness requires a lot of changing of minds, it means letting go of the world’s idea of power and authority.

A young missionary couple, with two young children, were told they needed to leave the country – unrest was growing. They could bring out of the country 100lbs of their belongings. They’d been there a few years and had amassed quite a bit of stuff. So they sorted and argued and deliberated and finally settled on their 100lbs of belongings – some clothes, books, photos, the usual. They sadly left the rest behind but, mostly contentedly, showed up to the steamer ship with their 100lbs to be weighed and put aboard. The attendant looked at their baggage and then he looked back at the couple and asked, “Did you count the children? The children are included in the 100lbs.” Suddenly the seeming importance of their worldly goods faded away as the children were weighed and a very few books and a favourite toy for each child made it onto the ship. The rest was left behind. We are God’s children, of more importance than all of the stuff of the world we’ve acquired. As God’s children we must take the risk of answering Jesus’ question: which child are you – the first or the second son? Do you walk in God’s ways or only say and think that you do? These are the same questions we must ask together as the Church. Are we in the role of the second son who says he will work but does not? The chief priests and the elders who do not practice what they preach? Do we compete and compare ourselves to perceived rivals? Is success the number of people who gather for worship and the ability to pay our

bills? Is this the power we seek? It is human power despite our claims that we would use that power for the “good” of the world.

With no worldly possessions, naked on the cross, Jesus still held more power than all of the worldly powers combined. His power is of God, his authority in his title that could not be stripped away: “Son of God.” In the humble, serving, loving power of his authority, Jesus shares that title with us: Children of God. It is a title that cannot be stripped away because it became ours when we became a part of Christ’s body. Sharing the title means we share in the authority and the power – the humble, serving, loving power that is the ministry of transformation. Not reaching down but standing with. Not giving out but gathering in. Not creating divides but healing the brokenness. Casting aside the world’s idea of power and success and living into God’s purpose of the reconciliation of all things, living in God’s kingdom.

“Which one did the will of the father?” Jesus asks. The first – the one who went into the vineyard and worked. The proof is in the pudding.