

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 2008

Rev. Graham McAnalley

Matthew 21: 23-32

"Living One's Words"

There are no surprises for anyone who's ever been a parent in this morning's parable about two brothers. Every parent has had the experience, often, of asking a child to do something, being assured that it will be done, only later to find that the task has been left undone. The bed has not been made, the room has not been tidied, the washing up has not been done, the path has not been swept or whatever. Bring back memories? Less frequent, but perhaps not entirely unknown, is the experience of asking a child to do something, being told in no uncertain terms that he or she will not do as asked, and then finding later that the chore has actually been done. While all parents would love to have children who always say "yes" when asked to do something and then go and do it, few of us seem to be, or have been, blessed with them. The story Jesus told reflects family life, in his day and ours, pretty accurately.

We don't know when or how often Jesus told this story – and Matthew is the only Gospel to record it. It is important to see the context in which Matthew places it. It is Jerusalem in the last week of Jesus' life. That week began, you will recall, with what we know as Palm Sunday – Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey to the applause of his followers and supporters. Then, the same day according to Matthew and the next day according to Mark, Jesus entered the Temple, drove out those who were selling sacrificial birds and animals, upset the tables of those changing other currency into Temple coinage, stopped those who were using the Temple courts as a short-cut across the city, and proceeded to teach and heal. When Jesus entered the Temple the following day he was met with a delegation of high priests and elders who had a question for him:

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?

The question no doubt related to his teaching and healing in the Temple the previous day, and probably also to what we know as the cleansing of the Temple.

It was a fair enough question. Was his authority to do these things given him by God, or had he simply assumed it for himself? Jesus didn't answer the question. He didn't refuse to answer it, but said that he would only answer it if his questioners answered a question from him:

Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?

See what Jesus has done. His answer is not simply a clever manoeuvre to escape a question intended to trap him; it actually focuses, not on John as a person, but on the baptism which John proclaimed and practised. To the chief priests and elders Jesus has an authority, whether of divine or human origin, and having that authority he does certain things. By contrast, Jesus does not speak of John's authority, but of the authority of John's baptising. For Jesus, authority does not reside with a person but with what that person does. It is the baptism John offers, and the proclamation around it, that has authority.

Note that those who question Jesus about his authority are themselves people of authority. They are the chief priests and elders – people who exercise authority over others, and others recognise their

authority. That is why they refuse to answer Jesus' question about John the Baptist. They reason among themselves that if they say John's baptism was from God, Jesus will turn the question back on them and ask why, then, didn't they believe him – that is, acknowledge and accept his message. They will then look foolish, to say the least, to those over whom they exercise authority. On the other hand, they reason, if they say John's baptism was of human origin, the people will rise up and reject their authority, since the common people believed that John had a message from God. That's why they reply to Jesus: *"We do not know."*

They were concerned to find the right words, words that would not undermine their authority. Their words are not the truth, but a face-saving reply. Their primary concern is to uphold their own authority. For them, authority is a possession to be safeguarded, conferring a status that sets them apart from ordinary people – people without any status or authority. That kind of authority is of human origin, for it depends upon how one's words are received. But for Jesus, words only carry authority if they reflect one's actions. Actions, not words, are what mediate authority. Words have to be consistent with one's actions or else they lose any meaning or integrity.

It is no wonder that Matthew chose to follow this conversation between Jesus and the Temple authorities with the parable of the Two Sons, which the chief priests and elders are asked to interpret. In this parable words are contrasted with deeds. The first son refuses to do as his father asks, but in the end does it. The second son agrees to do as his father asks, but he doesn't. In each case, words don't match deeds: deeds, whether done or left undone, speak louder than words. Neither son is perfect. But, of the two, the boy who eventually did what his father asked is the more worthy. Deeds, not words, are what counts.

In their quite correct interpretation of the parable the religious authorities condemn themselves and their reliance on words to impose their authority. They admit that it is deeds, not words, which establish one's worthiness; and implicitly they are affirming that those who accepted John's call to repentance and baptism were responding in obedience to God. And that is the point that is pressed home by the final application of the parable to those who question Jesus about the source of his authority.

They correctly identify which son had done the will of his father, thereby revealing themselves as disobedient sons. As religious leaders they claim to be obedient to God, but they fail the test of obedience when they are confronted by God in a new revelation. Their refusal to see God at work in the ministry of John the Baptist led to their inability to see God at work in the ministry of Jesus. As a consequence, says Jesus, the non-religious – tax collectors and prostitutes and others not very observant of religious taboos and requirements – who did respond to John, and to Jesus, will go into the kingdom ahead of them.

Matthew, of course, is writing his Gospel for the church. The attitude of the chief priests and elders is a warning to those in Matthew's community not to be blind to what God may be doing. And that, of course, is a warning to the church and its members today.

We can become so caught up with the church, with keeping the institution afloat, with doing the things that have always been part of the church's life, that we fail to notice how the Spirit of God is moving outside the walls of the church. We may fail to notice a new hunger among the non-religious, among those who never set foot inside a church building, for a spirituality which helps them make sense of life. We may fail to recognise the call of God in new challenges which confront us today – challenges to which others who profess no religious convictions are perhaps responding better than we are. We may fail to recognise the activity of God in religious movements and faith communities very different from our own. We may all too easily fail to "recognise God's image in one who is not

in our image,” to borrow a phrase from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. To fail to recognise and respond appropriately to the Spirit of God at work in the world around us is to make the same error of judgement as the chief priests and elders of Jesus’ day. It is to be the son in our Lord’s parable, who said the thing his father wanted to hear, but who did not do what his father wanted.

The parable also has another message for us if we approach it a little differently. As I said earlier, we do not know when or how often Jesus told this story of the two sons. No doubt he told it more than once as he travelled through Galilee and Judea.

Matthew has placed it in a particular context. But if we take it out of that context and omit the final interpretation which applies it to the chief priests and elders, we are left with a homely little story that many families know only too well. One brother says he won’t do what his father wants, but in the end does it. The other brother readily agrees to do what his father asks, but never gets around to doing it.

Read this way it illustrates the difference between words and deeds. It could well be a commentary on those words of Jesus, found earlier in the Gospel:

*Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

One of the great temptations Christians face is to give lip service to Christian beliefs without translating those beliefs into our daily living. We speak of Christian beliefs, but Christianity is not primarily a set of beliefs; it is a following of Jesus, whose life taught as much as his words.

The difficulty, of course, in following Jesus is that he did not lay down a whole lot of rules and regulations which we are to obey. He simply said, “Follow me.” And that means, among other things, studying his words and deeds in the context of his own time and then seeing how they relate to us in our time. And that will mean allowing them to challenge our natural inclinations, our own ideas of what is right and wrong, and the pressures to conform to the norms and expectations of the society in which we live and the circles in which we move. That is not easy, but Jesus never suggested that it would be.

If our profession of the Christian faith is not matched by deeds which reflect the radical and counter-cultural following of Jesus, then we cannot expect our professed faith to be taken seriously.