

## Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020 – Bulwell United Reformed Church

The service this week looks at Matthew 21: 23-32. Jesus is questioned about the nature and source of his authority. After testing his questioners, who decline to respond, Jesus also refuses to answer. Instead, he tells a parable about the priority of faithfulness and obedience over appearances. The passage explores identity; authority; authenticity. *A short service for personal communion focusing on confessing Jesus is Lord is included. Please have your bread & wine/juice ready.*

### A prayer of approach

Generous, hospitable God, who turns no one away,  
welcome each one of us now  
in this time of worship and gathering  
and embrace us in your being.  
**Amen.**

### A prayer of confession

Merciful God, forgive us:  
for times when we have denied your authority,  
and gone our own way;  
for times when we have tried to be someone we are not,  
and hidden your image within us;  
for times when we have not been true to you,  
or to the gospel values you have entrusted to us.  
**Merciful God, forgive us, renew us, restore us,  
that we may be what you have made us,  
go where you will guide us,  
and do as you would have us do.  
In the name of Jesus.  
Amen.**

*Our Father .....*

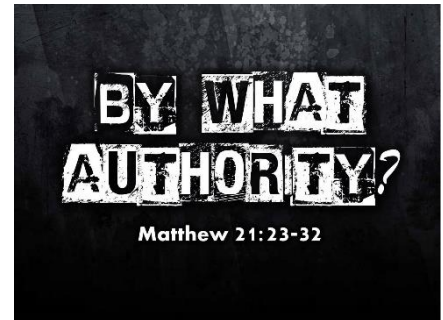
**Song Cornerstone - Hillsong Live 2012 - (HD) (With Lyrics)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvLxZEU02ul>

### **Matthew 21: 23-32 = The authority of Jesus questioned**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?'

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, 'I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>25</sup> John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?'



They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will ask, "Then why didn't you believe him?"' <sup>26</sup> But if we say, "Of human origin"— we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.'

<sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.'

Then he said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

### **The parable of the two sons**

<sup>28</sup> 'What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard."

<sup>29</sup> "'I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> 'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup> 'Which of the two did what his father wanted?'

'The first,' they answered.

Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. (NIVUK)

### **Jesus' Authority – Who do you think you are?**

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus was challenged by those in authority. 'Who gave you authority to be here and do that?' It doesn't sound very welcoming at all. The Temple had strict rules about where certain people could go and what they could do. By those rules, the people with Jesus ('tax-collectors and prostitutes') would not have been allowed into most parts of the Temple. But Jesus says that it is those people, and not the authorities challenging him, who are closer to God.

There is a tension between the authority that comes from being a representative of a religious institution and natural – or even divine – authority. This is not unusual, with new initiatives sometimes being seen as threatening the representatives of established institutions. In the 18th century, John Wesley was repeatedly challenged by bishops and parish priests to justify his preaching in areas where he had no specific Anglican episcopal or parish authority; in response, he stated in his journal that 'I look upon all the world as my parish.'

Jesus answers the questions of those in authority with a question of his own, to which he does not supply an answer. He also tells a parable with an open question, leaving people to come to their own conclusion. In the parable, both sons could be described as hypocrites; that is, both say one thing and do the other. However, Jesus' question is telling: 'Which of the two did the will of his father?' The first man gives the wrong answer but does the right thing. The second answers appropriately, but his actions undermine what he says. By telling a story, Jesus draws the listeners in, but he also presents a clear challenge. They will have to make a decision; they will have to come off the fence.

The parable is usually understood to challenge those who claim to be following God's laws, but in reality do not; and who say the right things, but whose lives do not reflect the will and love of God. There is often great weight placed on orthodoxy – or 'right belief' – in some parts of the church, but perhaps we should give more weight to orthopraxy – that is 'right practice'. Righteous faith and worship is not a matter of saying or singing the right words, but of faith and action, saying and doing the right thing – emphasised in this passage by looking after the vulnerable.

That 'tax-collectors and prostitutes' were numbered among Jesus' followers would have been seen by the religious elite as evidence that Jesus, like John the Baptist before him, was not the Messiah, nor even a respectable rabbi. But Jesus suggests that those who were the lowest of the low in the eyes of the religious leaders were actually doing what God wanted of them, while they – 'the chief priests and the elders of the people' – were not. Who are the equivalent of 'tax collectors and prostitutes' in our community today? Is our church reaching out to them?

As former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, famously suggested that the Church is the only organisation that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members. Our job – as the Church – is to stand with those who feel excluded in our society, for whatever reason. We should work hard, not just to say that everyone is welcome and belongs, but to make sure that everyone really feels that they are welcome and do belong.

### **Prayers of intercession**

We pray for our leaders and all in positions of authority; especially we pray for the police, the courts and all justice agencies: that they may be strong in leadership, and just and honest in serving their communities...

We pray for decision-makers; especially today for those who work for hospital trusts, social services departments and benefits offices: that they may have wisdom, knowledge and compassion for those whose lives are in their hands...

We pray for religious leaders: that they may be conscientious in prayer and study, and have vision, insight and discernment in leadership and service in their communities...

We pray for those with authority in schools and colleges; for head teachers and principals, governors and teachers: that they may have gentleness, faithfulness and self-control, and work with patience and kindness...

Lord, hear us.

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

In the name of God who made all that is, and to whom we ascribe all power and authority, now and always.

**Amen.**

*Please add your prayers for others you wish to pray for today . . .*

**Song From heaven you came helpless babe (Graham Kendrick)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOnidzZusJA>

**HOLY COMMUNION Prayer of Thanksgiving – Matthew 21: 23-32**

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,  
for you are at work among us,  
conforming our will and our work to your sacred purposes.

Your child Jesus, though one with you,  
was born as one of us and humbled himself,  
passing through the ancient waters of baptism  
and following the ways of righteousness  
even to the point of death on a cross.  
Therefore you raised him to life  
and exalted him above every other power.  
Now you embrace all who in action confess him as Lord,  
baptising them in his name into the life of your Kingdom.



***Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,  
we offer you thanks and praise at all times  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.  
Amen.***

**The Sharing of the Bread and the Wine**

We give thanks to you, O God, that you cause the vine to yield fruit.  
We bless you for Christ, the true vine, whose blood was poured out for us.  
By your Holy Spirit sanctify us and this wine, that the cup which we bless may be to us the  
communion of the blood of Christ, and that through abiding in him we may bear fruit that  
shall last.

Eat this bread. It is the bread of life.

Drink this wine. It is the cup of blessing.

**Prayer after communion**

Loving God, you have fed us generously at this table, as we have remembered Jesus and  
rejoiced that he is with us today. We are ready now to follow him, and to be your people in  
the world. May your Holy Spirit show us the way, make us holy and fill us with love.

**A sending out prayer**

May we go, Lord God,  
to meet the needs of others  
and share the love we have from you.

**Amen**

