

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020**  
**Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Collect**

Lord of creation,  
whose glory is around and within us:  
open our eyes to your wonders,  
that we may serve you with reverence  
and know your peace at our lives' end,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Philippians 2:1-13**

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**Matthew 21:23-32**

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?" Jesus said to them, "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?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' 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." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For 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.

## Sermon

Once again I am reading George Orwell's book "1984". The words that first come to mind when I think of that book are "Big Brother is watching you." Perhaps for us it feels a bit like that at the moment; in the current Covid crisis, if we do not keep the rules be sure that we will be caught out. Our present situation makes us think carefully about what we do. It also makes us think about questions of life and death, about relationships, about our priorities, about our hopes and our fears. One thing we all have in common is a concern to come through these times and return to whatever we regard as a normal way of life - or whatever the "new normal" will be.

We know that in the present situation what matters most is that we respond to what we are asked to do in such a way that we minimise risk and ensure our mutual safety and wellbeing. The problem is that the way we actually respond to a situation may be different from the way we know we ought to respond or say we are going to. There may be all sorts of reasons why our response does not match our conviction:

- It may be fear of upsetting someone
- It may be fear of the consequences for ourselves
- It may be an unwillingness to speak out
- Uncertainty about whether or not we are doing the right thing
- A concern that our actions may destroy valued friendships

It is not always easy to match our actions with our convictions. We may sometimes find ourselves saying one thing and doing another.

That is the situation we have in today's Gospel.

Jesus tells a parable about the owner of a vineyard who has two sons. They are both asked to go out and work in the vineyard. For both of them the response is quite different from what they think or say. One says "I will go" and does not. The other says "I won't go" and does.

The context for this story is yet another confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities. Jesus is teaching in the temple, and the chief priests and the elders use this opportunity to try to discredit him and find more evidence that will condemn him. They want to know where Jesus gets his authority from to teach in the temple and say what he is saying. They think that's a good question and one he will not be able to answer. Everyone knows that they are the only ones who have authority to teach in the temple. This is bound to catch him out.

But of course it doesn't. As we hear, Jesus responds by throwing another question back at them. One way of dealing with a question you don't want to answer is to respond with another question. Suddenly, the question is not about what Jesus thinks, but what his opponents think. He knows that it's a question they can't answer without getting themselves into trouble. So they end up by saying "We do not know."

Jesus very cleverly moves the question away from himself to John the Baptist. If they can answer his question, then he will answer their's. But he knows they can't do that. The question Jesus poses is this: "Was John's ministry - Matthew uses the word "baptism" - was it from God or was it of merely human origin?"

The problem for the chief priests is that John has publicly testified to Jesus. If they say “from God” they are not only accepting John’s ministry but Jesus’ ministry as well. They cannot endorse John without endorsing Jesus. That they are not prepared to do. If they opt for the other answer and say John’s ministry is of merely human origin, then they will find themselves at odds with the people, who honour John as a prophet. Not surprising that they choose not to give an answer and say “We do not know.”

Jesus goes on to tell the parable. He wants to show up the chief priests and religious leaders as the people who say “I will go” but do not go. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are those who say they will not go, but do. They may have disregarded the law, but they have come to obey God through the ministry of John. The chief priests and elders, despite their religious profession, disobeyed God by not believing in John. They say “I will go” but do not.

It is interesting that Jesus begins the parable of the two sons with the question “What do you think?” It’s a question Jesus asks six times in Matthew’s Gospel, but only once in the rest of the Gospels. It’s as if Matthew wants to portray Jesus as a poser of questions: that our response to his ministry and our calling is to continue to be confronted by the question “What do you think?”

Last week when I came to the 9 30 service I particularly recall reciting the creed along with everyone else and thinking: here is set out in plain language what I am expected to believe as a Christian. It represents our shared belief. I may have difficulty with some of the things I am expected to believe. There seems little room for any kind of an answer to the question “What do you think?” And yet Jesus puts that question six times to people in Matthew’s Gospel. And it’s a question which keeps coming back to us.

We think of all the moral and ethical dilemmas which face us today - questions about Covid 19, racism, inequality, refugees, climate change, the environment. All of which ask us to answer the question “What do you think?” Once we decide what we do think, the question arises: can we match our convictions with our actions.

We may turn to the scriptures, but the chances are that we will not find there any ready-made answers to our questions. What we will find is the record of the life and work of someone who never wavered from his devotion to God. We will find there someone who was determined, come what may, that his deeds and his words would always be true to his beliefs and convictions. We will find there someone who gave of himself, regardless of the cost, to build the Kingdom of God here on earth.

As his followers, with God’s help, may we be enabled to do the same. Amen.