

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

27 September 2020

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Ordinary 26 [A]

(for Contemplatio)

From Whence Comes Your Authority

The capacity for self-delusion is infinite.

If this is true, then I guess it includes us !

This little insight into human nature is in evidence in Jesus encounter with the chief priests and elders. Self-deception, and the lack of self-knowledge, swamp this ancient Palestinian narrative.

As usual, context is everything.

I listened to Sarah Bachelard speaking on this last night and she reminded us, as scholars have observed, that this is the beginning of the end - the Passion narrative.

Jesus starts on the Mount of Olives; enters Jerusalem on a donkey, acts which are redolent with associations with King David and prophecies. The king's mourning is echoed in Jesus' shedding tears over Jerusalem, and there is the prophetic connection between King and Priest.

This coming to the temple follows upon the entry to Jerusalem; the cursing of the fig tree – the cursing of an entity that gives no life; the turning over of the money-changers' tables – yet another expulsion of that which brings no life. Jesus points to signs and prophecies, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and not the nice restoration bits either !

These are unambiguously political actions.

The cure of the blind and the lame is not just about healing, but about the healing of those who were *legally* and *socially* cut off from the community and from justice – the ones who, according to Leviticus, were ritually excluded.

Jesus miracles signify the *destruction* of legal and ritual exclusion and, by extension, the perpetrators thereof.

Jesus was now enacting the claim as the One who was to come, the One who would herald *true* and *right* worship. The kind of worship about which Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Hosea had exhorted the '*vineyard*'.

Thus, there is a sharp and bitter edge to the question the chief priests and elders hurl at Jesus. It's full and venom and has entrapment written all over it.

"... By what authority... and, who gave you this authority?"

This is a question about power - their power - and their intent is to accuse him of blasphemy and, since we are post-Easter people, we know what the outcome will be.

Those who presume to speak for God are not the slightest bit interested in being transformed by God. Otherwise, they would have listened to the prophets, even more to that contemporary prophetic 'Elijah' figure, John the Baptist. And, unsurprisingly, John the Baptist enters stage left. Jesus response to the loaded question is to skilfully redirect the 'blasphemy trap'.

Jesus' 'redirect' reveals the true motives of the chief priests and elders, it's not about the truth of God but about their own personal obsessive desire for power. Their response is conditioned by their desire for power, *not* for divine truth.

Jesus puts them on the horns of a dilemma.

John's baptism – this transformative act – was it 'from heaven', in which case why didn't you believe him? Or was it of 'human origin', and then they're afraid of the public reaction – how like the politician - for the crowd saw John as a prophet.

Then follows a parable.

It challenges them to engage with the truth.

By the use of the image of the vineyard, a familiar and ancient archetype was evoked – Jesus was talking about them - the embodied Israel.

“Which brother are you ?” Jesus says to them.

Are they capable of seeing themselves as they really are – not as self-deluded creatures who project their shadowy selves onto those around them ?

Conversion is not about being good, but about getting real with ourselves - it’s about coming home to ourselves.

It’s about finding our inner prostitute or tax collector - for these are they who hold no delusions about themselves - and, Jesus tells us, they will come into the reign of God long before those who persist in projecting murderous and corrupting self-delusion.

”Which brother are you ?” Jesus says to us.

We are called to come to terms with our shadowy selves. When we do, we will become ‘real’ - our spiritual journey is this coming to ourselves.

Jesus spoke authoritatively: the Baptist came with the way of righteousness and the prostitutes and tax collectors believed him; but the ‘others’, even after they saw it, did not change their minds and believe him.

In our practice of meditation we are called *not* to collude in *anti-divinity*.

Instead we are invited to come face to face with our deluded shadowy selves.

We are called to get to know the prostitute and tax collector within all of us, and then to plumb the depths of our souls - this is the kenotic shape of our mystical Christian faith.

Are we a people who claim to speak for God or, more properly, are we a people who are willing to be transformed by God, a people always in conversion ?

Then we can become.

As Saint Seraphim of Sarov, the Thirteenth Century orthodox mystic expressed it “acquire inner peace, and a multitude will find salvation.”

PROPERS

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Collect of the Day

Grant, O merciful God,
that your people may have that mind that was in Christ Jesus,
who emptied himself, and took the form of a servant,
and in humility became obedient even to death.
For you have highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
Jesus Christ, the Lord;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, in everlasting glory. Amen.

READINGS

Exodus 17.1-7

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' ⁵ The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Psalms 78.1-4, 11-16

¹ Give heed to my teaching, O my people:
incline your ears to the words of my mouth;
² For I will open my mouth in a parable:
and expound the mysteries of former times.
³ What we have heard and known:
what our forebears have told us,
⁴ We will not hide from their children,
but declare to a generation yet to come:
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
his mighty and wonderful works.
¹¹ For he did marvellous things
in the sight of their ancestors:
in the land of Egypt, in the country of Zoan.
¹² He divided the sea and let them pass through:

he made the waters stand up in a heap.

¹³ In the daytime he led them with a cloud:

and all night long with the light of fire.

¹⁴ He cleft rocks in the wilderness:

and gave them drink in abundance

as from springs of water.

¹⁵ He brought streams out of the rock:

and caused the waters to flow down like rivers.

¹⁶ But for all this they sinned yet more against him:

and rebelled against the Most High in the desert.

Philippians 2.1-30

¹ If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

¹² 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; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴ Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶ It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— ¹⁸ and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. ¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be

cheered by news of you. ²⁰ I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³ I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; ²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon. ²⁵ Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow-soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; ²⁶ for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷ He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. ²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹ Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour such people, ³⁰ because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

Matthew 21.23-32

²³ 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?' ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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?" ²⁶ But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." ²⁹ He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.