

**Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017**

**Trinity 16: Matt.21:23-32; Phil.2:1-13**

Just who the blazes do you think you are?

It's not hard to sympathise with the high priests' question. Here is this young upstart, this Scripture thumping hack from Galilee. He has ridden into town, on his donkey – the sheer arrogance of that, echoing the old Zechariah prophecy of the return of the true King. He has let his supporters wave palm branches and call him Son of David, indeed he has egged them on. And now he presumes to come into the Temple and throw the money-changers out, and interfere with the sacrifices, and act as if he owns the place. And he does all this, young fool, in the midst of a very delicate political situation, with Romans all round the place, all tensed up, sensitive to any kind of trouble, ready to crush any kind of mob excitement. Jesus whips up all this dangerous, populist, emotion as if he's asking for the whole carefully balanced political set-up to come crashing down around him in rebellion and war.

Just who the blazes does he think he is?

The interesting thing though, is that the high priests and their colleagues and not really interested in the answer to their own question. They are not *seriously* interested in who Jesus thinks he might be. They are not really open to contemplating that actually, yes, He might be of God. He might be the one in whom all the promises come true: the one who can stand in the Temple and act as if He owns the place just because He *does* own it. No. The high priests are not even contemplating that possibility.

You can tell that by the way they react to his counter question. *You tell me: where did John get his authority from? You tell me that, and I'll tell you on what authority I do these things.*

Now the problem for the leaders is this:

Say that John's authority comes from God – and their world is thrown upside down. John's message had been one of radical critique of *them*. They were the leaders of Israel, and John said that under them the nation had drifted into spiritual and moral disaster. That the judgement of God was coming on them and their system. A high priest could not possibly say that John was of God, without changing his entire world-view, his entire life.

So say then that John's authority came from somewhere else – say, for instance, that he was driven by a demon. Or that his charisma was just that of a mad fanatic. That is probably, indeed, what the high priests thought. But they couldn't *say so*, faced with Jesus and his mob, because then people would turn against them. The people had *loved* John. The people *knew*, they were *sure*, that John was of God. Go publicly in the face of that, and a high priest risked their fury, risked his position and perhaps his very life.

Go one way, and you have to change your whole life; go the other and perhaps you lose it.

It is very easy to sympathise with the High Priests. Just who the blazes does Jesus think he is?

**But** ... if all their attention, if all *your* attention, is focussed on the *consequences* of answering a question either way, it shows you're not really that bothered about the actual answer. You're worried, rather, about your position. How you can keep things secure, ordered, safe, working to your advantage. The high priests are not *really* asking who Jesus is, or by what authority he does these things. They don't really want to know. What they want is for their lives, their way of organising things, their power and their privilege to carry on smoothly. And because they don't *really* care about their question, Jesus doesn't answer it. *Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.*

So what is the lesson for us?

Well, it is the basic warning of a lot of the New Testament.

If you are going to seriously engage with God, you will find it comes at a great personal cost. He might indeed ask you to radically change your life, to abandon what is secure and comfortable, to risk loss of status and even loss of life.

And there is a P.S. as well:

You might find that the more religious you are – and they don't come more religious than high priests – the easier it is to not hear God asking. The easier it is to confuse your idea of what is right and ordered and safe, what *you want*, with what God wants. Religion can become a very good way of not hearing God.

If you doubt that, consider the number of religious people who are very, very fussed about what God says about sex who appear quite deaf to what He says about money. For some, thinking the right way about sexual ethics seems to have become the most important indicator of being a sound Christian or not. Listening to them, you would think that Jesus must have been very clear on the point – but in fact, he said a great deal more about money. Many of us don't want to hear that. Forgive people their debts? Feed the hungry and clothe the naked? Give 10% of it away, even maybe give it *all* away? That would require too much change. Who does Jesus think he is, telling me how to run my money?

Or consider the number of religious people who are just the opposite: who are *very* keen on what God says about money – about giving it away, about serving the poor, about the awfulness of greed and the beauty of social justice – and yet are not very interested in what He says about sex. They're not bound by silly old stuck-in-the mud, repressed, maybe even bigoted ideas about sex. God's not *really* interested in what consenting adults do in their bedrooms, is he, or what they watch on their computers? Well, the Bible suggests He is. Many of us don't want to hear that. That would require too much change. Who does Jesus think he is, telling me how to run my sexuality?

Every so often people ask me to define exactly who is and is not a Christian. To be a Christian, do you have to believe that Jesus is God? Do you have to believe every line in the Creed? Do you have to believe every word in the Bible? I think I have just found the best answer. ***A Christian is a person who has given up asking: who does Jesus think He is?*** A Christian is a person who has decided that Jesus, whoever He is, *is* the one who owns the place; is the one with a perfect right to question how I run my finances, how I live my sexuality, how every single part of my life works. He is the One who owns them. He is the one who has the right to order them how He wants – and that may not be, and sometimes is definitely *not*, how I want them.

What does that mean in practice? Well, the whole of Christian life is about working out the answer to that, and it might look different for each of us. But the New Testament reading gives a good general pattern. *Do nothing, St. Paul says, 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.* That's the kind of life the Owner wants, a life like His was, a life which is all about helping others flourish. That's the test of how you handle money, how you handle sex, how you handle everything. It's not about you. It's about your neighbour, and how they flourish. It's about your life, given for them.

And that is why we come here, to the Eucharist. If all Christianity had to say was 'you must be like this, you must give your life for others', frankly it would not be much use. Even if we agreed, it would just be another piece of good advice, another bit of try-harder moralism. Most of us do try, and we fail. But *that is not the Gospel.*

The Gospel is that love, pouring out, generosity is the strongest power in the universe.

That that was proved by Jesus of Nazareth in his Cross and Resurrection.

The Gospel is that He is still alive, and offers to share that power with us.

That he will pour it into us through bread and wine.

We come to the Eucharist because it's here that the power flows into us, the energy flows into us, that is able – bit by slow bit – to take our lives, and make them serve others. Where Jesus flows into us, and takes our money, sexuality, every last bit of us – and makes it a way of enriching others, making them flourish. We come because here we are in touch with a love which will change us in ways we could not possibly do for ourselves – ways we have perhaps not even learned to want yet.

Who does He think He is? He is the one who made us, and loves us, and who – if we let him – will remake us, and make us astounding.

To him be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

