

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 21

September 27, 2020

Year A RCL

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32; Psalm 25:1-8; Matthew 21:23-32

“Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”

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The passage of this gospel is situated after Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem. Going to Jerusalem implied that he was going to be condemned and put to death, which Jesus knew and shared with the disciples who were unprepared and unaware of how to respond. On the contrary, the Jewish leaders notice how popular, wise, and influential Jesus was. After Jesus cleans the temple, the leaders go there while Jesus was teaching and want to receive answers from him.

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

The question seems legitimate; they are curious to know the source of Jesus' authority and especially who is behind Jesus' teachings. Since in their system of doctrines, they are the maximum authority and they are unable to explain how Jesus teachings were superior and more popular than their own, being that they are the *“elders of the people”*. In asking for the authority, they want to understand how they might control Jesus.

Since all this happened at the temple the day after Jesus had cursed the fig tree that remained unfruitful (Mt 21:18-22), which in the Jewish tradition represents judgement over the people of Israel (Jeremiah 8:13; 29:17; Hosea 2:12; 9:10), it is necessary to see beyond the facts and understand that what is at stake here is God's revelation in Jesus and the restoration of the temple for a new way of being in relationship with God. The "elders of the people" who are questioning Jesus authority, had failed to direct people to God; they are benefiting from the religious system and temple offerings and are content to keep it as it has always been.

In the same way the gospel of Matthew had anticipated Jesus passion and resurrection, it had shown that Jesus' power and authority is not from this world. His power brings reconciliation, peace, healing, and wholeness which is contrary to the power and authority of the world who is domination, alienation, and violence.

Many biblical scholars believe that this encounter between two opposite religious systems is what confirm for the Jewish religious authorities, that the only way to control Jesus power and authority was to put him to death by invoking the support of the political authorities and accusing him in front of the Roman Empire.

From Jesus perspective his authority is mercy and compassion for all human beings. The cleaning of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree are symbolic actions requiring change and the transformation from the people as another opportunity to start anew. Jesus desires for everyone to have a right relationship with God, and that they have a fruitful life.

Jesus refrains from answering their question knowing what they are thinking, instead asking them about the origins of John's baptism. In asking about John's baptism, Jesus associates his own ministry with the call for conversion that John has started, and in which the Jewish leaders have not wanted to participate.

To make his point even clearer, Jesus mentions the parable of the father that ask his two sons to go out to work in his vineyard. (In the Bible the vineyard is associated with Israel). One of the sons said that he would not, and later changes his mind and went. The other said, yes, and never went. *“Which of the two did the will of his father?”* The answer is without a doubt, the one who went out to work. The circumstances, excuses or how this happens is not as important as the fact of accomplishing the father's will.

It is the same for us, actions are more important than words. The way how we care, help, and love others is more beneficial than our good wishes for them. In the society where we hear or use the expression “our thoughts and prayers”,

we need to seriously question if it is enough for others? Jesus authority is more powerful than any human authority because his word and actions are always equal.

The religious leaders are satisfied with their system of “thoughts and prayers” and are doing little for the people. Jesus mentions *“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”* This is to remind them and us, that our actions in the end are what really count.

The obedience and commitment to do the Father’s will is when we say yes to him with our deeds. Our words without actions are empty attempts to live a Christian life. The call to work in the Father’s vineyard is received the day we are baptized, and all our life we have an opportunity to grow in submission and answer to the Father’s will. It is in our day to day where we need to change our minds to understand that Jesus authority is different from that of this world. He confers His authority to us and send us out to work in His vineyard.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Mt. 28:18-19). Amen.