

Our reading from Matthew this evening has one major similarity with the reading we had from Matthew a fortnight ago. You may recall from Matthew 17, our reading on November 19th, had a section on Jesus foretelling his death with *The Son of Man will be betrayed....* A section followed with a discussion of the Temple Tax and whether Jesus was paying it, should have to pay it, or chooses to pay because it is not worth the fight over the issue. Jesus makes it clear that he doesn't need to pay because taxes that kings levy are paid by their subjects not by their sons. Therefore he would be exempt from a tax to support God's temple. But he chooses not to force the issue and provides Peter with a coin to make the payment out of the mouth of a fish. Only when we read these two sections with the mind of a person used to searching for deeper meaning through allegory, metaphor, and symbol did we discover that these two sections are closely aligned to express the full nature of Jesus – fully human and fully God.

In our passage this evening we have a similar unapparent alignment between the sections – at least unapparent for those of us accustomed to only searching out literal meaning. In the first section the Chief Priests and the elders seek to challenge the authority Jesus has to teach. He responds: *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?* The Chief Priests and the Elders are flummoxed. They had despised John the Baptist. John was a prophet in the wilderness clad only in a rough garment of camel hair, eating locusts and honey. He baptised people in the Jordan more than 40 kilometres from the Temple and more than one thousand metres lower in elevation. He had a great following. But he could not have been more antithetical to the Temple establishment. But given John's following among the people the Chief Priests and the Elders knew they could not afford to risk alienating the people.

The Chief Priests and the Elders had sold out to Rome. As the price for being allowed to retain their privileges as religious leaders with all the glories and rewards of Temple Leadership, they had agreed to keep the populace quiet and unresisting of the demands of Roman rule. The last thing they could afford would be a popular rising of a horde of ordinary people inspired by John and his calls for repentance to disturb their uneasy peace with Rome. In response to Jesus' question they can neither affirm John's divine calling nor can they deny it for fear of the wrath of his followers. They say, therefore, *we do not know*. In their question of Jesus they sought to trap him as they had sought to do on several other occasions, but never had been successful. Once again Jesus flips the trap and captures them as the fear-filled hypocrites that they are.

So as we turn to the second section what is all this in the first sections to do with a father, two sons, and a vineyard needing attention in the second. The two sons: the first initially

disobedient, but in short order he becomes repentant and carries out his father's request. The second, obsequious in agreeing but failing completely to follow through. Jesus asks the Chief Priests and the Elders which of them were obedient to the Father's will. With a complete lack of understanding of the implication of their answer to themselves, they answer the first son is the obedient one even as it becomes clear that their own behaviour is akin to that of the second son. They talk a great line, but fail to deliver. Jesus says 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.*

The key message here is the sins of the tax collectors and the prostitutes do not condemn them irrevocably as long as they repent. Do not forget that repent means nothing more than turning – turning away from self-destructive behaviour which may also be destructive towards others. The tax collectors and the prostitutes get it and they turned and follow John and later Jesus. But the Chief Priests and the Elders remain locked in their sin because the price of turning is too high for them. Turning threatens their status and comforts. In Chapter 23 of Matthew, Jesus goes on to condemn them: *'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi.*

We have so many examples in human history of the privileged refusing to recognize the burden their privilege places on others, or even worse imagining that the burden on others is ordained by God to support them in their place of comfort, status, and glory to the ultimate glory of God. I am reminded of Robert Burns' poem Holy Wullie's Prayer. It begins: *O thou wha in the heaven does dwell, wha as it pleases best thyself, sends ane to heaven and ten to hell and a for thy glory and no for ony guid or ill they've done before thee. I bless and praise thy matchless might that thousands thou has left in night, but I am here before thy sight for gifts and grace, a burning and a shining light to a this place.* The poem continues for verses condemning the behaviour of others and calling for the severest judgement and punishment on them. It then finishes up with: *But Lord remember me and mine wi mercies temporal and divine, and a the glory shall be thine, amen, amen.*

A perfect current example of ego driven perfidy and hypocrisy is the call from the current President of the United States for the execution of a number of American lawmakers for treason. Their sin? Reminding members of the Armed Forces that they swore an oath to defend the Constitution not to blindly follow orders from whomever happens to be President.

Another example from the present day, it would appear likely that our Anglican Communion is about to fracture over the appointment of a woman as Archbishop of Canterbury. The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches seems ready to leave the Communion over having to accept the concept that the “first among equals” among national primates is a woman. Their privileged identity as men of great power in their respective churches emboldens them to pronounce whom God can call and whom God cannot call. They are ready to sacrifice the global communion on the altar of their masculine privilege. Even as we regret their hypocrisy, we need to be careful of our own.

Holy Wullie, the current President, and some bishops of the Global South have much in common. But unhappily we have more in common with them than we would like to believe. We are privileged people. How often do we rationalize our privilege with lines like: *Well, I worked hard for it* as though if those in the sweatshops of south and south-east Asia do not work harder than we can imagine, so we can have cheap, stylish clothing; or the salve to the conscience, *there's nothing I can do; or its not my responsibility*.

There is no greater barrier to action driven love for God and Neighbour than our own hypocrisy in rationalizing our own comfort and privilege. The choice is clear but oh so difficult to make! Will we follow the example of the Chief Priests and scribes or will we follow the example of the tax collectors and prostitutes to repent and believe. Turning is always open to us and even when we fall back to destructive ways re-turning again and again remains open to us. It is our choice. Jesus is always there to welcome us back if we can come without a backward eye on all to which we are saying no in order to say the greater Yes. Amen