

TFTD 23.29.

Matt 21.18-46

Monday March 27

In the streets of the city



Pilgrims visit the Dome of the Rock, standing on the site of the Temple.

Now after Jesus entered the temple courts, the chief priests and elders of the people came up to him and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

Matthew 21.23

This story takes us back to the excitement of Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into the city on a tide of popular acclaim. Now the hard work begins. Jesus has to win over the hearts and minds of the people who live there. So the next few chapters are full of

arguments, as one group after another comes to challenge his authority.

Who gave you this authority? Who said you could come here and say that? This is the question that underlies the whole chapter. Like John the Baptist, Jesus has a huge popular following. And like John, he has no formal authorization: both claimed a prophetic authority coming direct from God, unafraid of speaking truth to power. There's a kind of moral authority here that people instinctively recognize — and that's the source of the leaders' dilemma (vv.24-27).

Then, a parable that neatly turns the tables. Two sons, one father (vv.28-32). One polite and willing, a model son — except he doesn't actually do the job his father asked him to do. The other is sullen and surly, the type who automatically says No to anything you ask — but then when you look round, he's done it! Which one is the better son? Authority isn't really about having the right piece of paper. It's about bearing fruit: “You will recognize them by their fruit” (vv.18-22, cf. 7.15-20). It's about who is actually doing God's will, aligned to the values of God's kingdom.

And then another vineyard parable, on a much grander scale (vv.33-44). A wealthy landlord, living abroad, who sends his servants to collect the crop from the tenants who have been farming it for him. That was the basic rental agreement: as long as they gave the owner his share of the crop, they could live on his land and keep the surplus for themselves. There's a strong echo here of Isaiah ch.5, where the vineyard is Israel and the owner is God. Even without that echo, Jesus' audience would have been outraged by the actions of the tenants in this story, killing unarmed messengers, refusing the basic obligations they owe to the owner of the property.

A parable is not a political manifesto. It takes a slice of life, a situation the audience will recognize, and invites us to enter the world of the story. In the social world Jesus shared with his audience, what stands out in this parable is the incredible benevolence and trustfulness of the owner, sending in his own son to mediate after all these insults — an act of reckless generosity that results in the death of the heir. But even such generosity has its limits: the owner's anger and the

tenants' punishment (though shocking to us) belong to the shared expectations of Matthew's social world.

So who is Jesus talking about? To Matthew's original audience, the parable describes the fate of the religious leaders of his own community, who failed to recognize the authority of the prophets and God's son. But we can also read it as a challenge to all religious leaders — indeed, to all disciples of Jesus— of the danger of forgetting that we hold our commission “in trust” and will have eventually to “give account” of our charge (Hebrews 13.17).

Remember, O Lord, what you have wrought in us and not what we deserve; and as you have called us to your service, so make us worthy of our calling: through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN

God bless, Loveday

