

Authority and how to use it.

Isaiah 5 1 to 7 &

Matthew 21:23-32

On the day Theo is baptised and there is a mood to celebrate, the reading from Isaiah is sombre, it casts a shadow.

In the poetry and prophecy of Jewish worship, the land and the people were represented by the image of the vineyard.

In this reading, the vineyard was beautifully planted and carefully tended and yet there was no fruit. As the last verse explains – God looked for the fruit of justice but only saw bloodshed. He looked for the fruit of righteousness – but only hears a cry of distress.

Our current series for preaching and worship is on The Kingdom of Heaven. We have learned to expect the unexpected – that the first will be last and the last will be first – and that outward appearances are no guide to faithfulness.

Our Old Testament reading creates a backdrop in front of which the drama of our gospel reading will play out. In Jesus day do we find the fruit's of God's kingdom on display? Justice, Righteousness, Compassion, Humility, faithfulness? We shall see!

Gospel reading here.

The day before the encounter between Jesus and the Chief priest, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey to the acclaim of the ordinary people. He had gone to the temple and instead of worship discovered a marketplace and it angered him greatly so he created a riot, turning

over the tables of the money-changers and driving animals from the temple courts.

When he returns the next day the religious authorities come to ask the obvious question...

Just who do you think you are coming in here and causing trouble? What kind of authority do you think you have to do this?? Who gave you this authority?

During this season of talks and sermons on the Kingdom of Heaven, this gospel reading allows us to explore the question of authority and how authority is used. Does the use of authority display the characteristics of God's Kingdom, or is it more concerned with deciding who belongs and who doesn't?

In the church of England we like things orderly and legal. Wardens have authority and are annually sworn in to their responsibilities. Clergy have authority and are legally collated and installed – it feels like you are going to become part of the plumbing!

Imagine the same sort of temple scene playing out here at Holy Trinity where I am still Jonny-come-lately.

Just wait one minute, you've changed the platform! (*NB – I made it wider*) You've fiddled with the Sound System!! (*NB we have solved some sound issues!!*) Just who do you think you are to come here doing this?? What authority have you got for this????

And I could answer that as the Incumbent I have been given responsibility and the cure of Souls by the Bishop of Reading.

But who gave him HIS authority???

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His authority is under the Diocesan Bishop of Oxford Stephen Croft.

Well who gives him HIS authority???

Of course His authority is under the Archbishop of Canterbury and before the next question – He is given his authority under the Governor of the Church of England and defender of faith – Queen Elizabeth, and as the book of common prayer reminds us....

Read here the opening collect for the Sovereign.

Our theology has Bishops, Priests and Deacons serving with the authority given by and through the church under God. All well and good. But now we've got it – what are we supposed to do with it?

The Chief Priests and Elders in our gospel reading derived their authority from the time of Moses and Aaron. As a system of worship developed, so the structures of power and authority grew with it, the chief priest, the Sanhedrin ruling body and so on.

What was their authority for? How should it have been used?

In Jesus day their authority seemed to be used firstly to protect themselves in authority so that they could keep that authority. It was self serving. It was then used to control the ordinary worshipping population and limit their access to God. Their authority gave them power and the power enabled them to maintain authority.

But what authority doesn't like is uncertainty, or challenge, or wandering preachers from Nazareth who can do miraculous things. Authority makes rules and regulations so that they can decide who is in and who is out. Authority likes to decide what is authentic and what is not.

I remember being in a seminar when training for ministry. The passage of scripture under discussion was one of St.Paul's from Romans if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. That seems clear doesn't it? A good way of deciding who is saved and who is not for those that feel authority needs to be used to judge such things. But not everyone agreed.

As the discussion went on and became more heated I recall one of the students from the Baptist college actually banging his fist on his bible insisting on this clear and unequivocal definition as a test of authenticity....UNLESS you declare....

In an uncomfortable pause, the tutor very gently said – you seem very keen to rule people out.

The thing is, St.Paul wasn't writing down a formula by which to judge who is a Christian and who is not. He's standing against the authorities that have set up an exhausting system that rules more out than in. St.Paul is making it so simple. It's not about following endless laws and rules or formulas, but simply what is in your heart and your willingness to speak of Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

As adults, Charles and Laurie have spoken today of their faith. They are going to bring Theo and Henry up in the

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Christian faith. Our prayer is that their boys come to a knowledge and faith that is their own and they confirm their faith. Whatever authority is given to us should be used to serve the purpose of giving them every chance to grow in faith.

The chief priests demand to know by what authority Jesus is busting the place up and the find Jesus is in an argumentative mood. I know we are supposed to say Jesus is always perfect and amazing and wonderful but occasionally it looks and sounds like he's annoyed or angry or – like today – argumentative. It's because he was. I'm not answering you unless you answer me.

Actually it's a bit more subtle. The authority Jesus has comes from his Father in heaven. If the priests and elders can't recognise that, there's no point claiming the fact – it would be deemed blasphemous. The last person to have the same God given authority was John the Baptist. So Jesus challenges them.

Remember John who baptised in the River Jordan. This baptism of his – was that done under the authority of heaven or under his own human authority?

Suddenly the confident authority the chief priests felt they had disappears. If they declare the authority John the Baptist had was from Heaven (from God) then they should have believed in John and his message. If they say it was just him doing his own thing, then the people will turn against them because all the people recognised John as a prophet. So they ducked the answer and Jesus said well I'm not answering you either. (I told you he was argumentative).

He did though tell them a parable.

Laurie tells Henry to go and tidy up the toys in his bedroom and he moans about it and says no, but then later he thinks about it and goes off and tidies his room.

Charles tells Theo to go and tidy his bedroom and Theo says right away "yes Daddy" but doesn't bother to go and actually do it.

When it comes time to hand out cake at tea-time – which one did the will of their parents???
Henry of course. It's not so much about what you say – but what you do.

Then Jesus – who we have already decided is argumentative, sticks the theological boot in.

There are tax collectors (who we all know were shocking sinners) and prostitutes (who everyone considered to be lower than the low) who recognised righteousness when they saw it in John the Baptist.

They repented and changed their ways. You saw all this but nothing changed your minds. These sinners are getting into the kingdom ahead of you.

I wasn't brought up in the Church of England. I'm not sure I understood what bishops and priests and deacons were all about. I think it's true to say my Bretheren church was pretty suspicious about quite a lot of other churches. We were confident that WE were in God's Kingdom. Baptists were probably in God's Kingdom. Methodists were in God's Kingdom largely because they sang hymns so well. But Anglicans – well, not sure. Pentecostals – uncertain. Catholics???. Don't go there. If we could be so dubious about other Christian

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denominations then no-one else was going to be anywhere close to the kingdom of heaven.

It was very judgmental and where did anyone think they'd got that kind of authority? We were more like the chief priests and elders then we thought.

At his age – I would hope all this would go over Theo's head. My hope is that he is happy to come here – to play in crèche, to join our groups, to sing songs and take part and grow in faith.

When I was growing up in church, christening a child would have been thought meaningless – it didn't make Theo a Christian. I now view things from a different standpoint. In time, my hope is that Theo has been impressed by the love he has experienced and has grown to want to confirm his own faith. I'll need to exercise my authority. The Bishop will ask whether or not I've examined the candidates and are they ready for confirmation.

Will I have made it easy for Theo to grow in faith? I don't think it makes it easy if he's treated like an outsider because I haven't yet heard a St.Paul like declaration of faith.

I'm not looking to use my authority to judge who is out and control what they have to say to join in. I have a different point of view and I like to think it fits in the kingdom where the last is first and the first is last – where we expect the unexpected.

I choose to believe that Theo belongs to God kingdom through the love and grace of God – the choice Theo has is whether or not he wants to opt out.

My personal journey leads me to a place where I want to find any reason I can to welcome and include people and by doing so, see the grace of God at work in their lives.

People are more likely to repent when they hear of the love of God and His forgiveness. People are more likely to discover forgiveness, when they encounter Jesus Christ and see what his death and resurrection achieved. People, from young ones like Theo to older ones whom the church has alienated, or bruised or traumatised or excluded, are more likely to come to a place of believing and being able to articulate that belief, if they are welcomed, loved and included. I have evidence that the kingdom of God is like that. My authority comes from Jesus who kept including all the so-called wrong people – much to the annoyance of the authorities.

As a PCC we are beginning a conversation that will shape our worship and church life. May God grant us the grace and wisdom to use the authority given to us to make Holy Trinity a sign and a symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven. A place where righteousness is recognised, repentance practised (particularly by those in authority) and the invitation to belong is extended to all.

Today's parable teaches us that in God's kingdom words have their place, but it's our response to God and our actions that give substance to what we say. May Holy Trinity exhibit righteousness, justice, compassion, kindness, faithfulness and grace...

If we have authority – it's to be used to go on pushing wider the doors and inviting more in – to speak the word of hope I believe people long to hear...the kingdom of heaven is near you and is for you....