

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Matthew 22. 15-33)

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Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to say and ask and do these things? Why should we trust you? Our reading tonight is part of a lengthy meditation in Matthew's gospel on these questions about Jesus.

All along there's been this niggle – Matthew, writing for a community of Jewish Christians, needs to say how it is that the Jewish leaders did not recognise who Jesus was. Over and over again, he portrays the scribes and the elders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, puzzling over Jesus, challenging him, questioning and debating him. By this point in the gospel account, their suspicion and their desire to undermine him is becoming even more acute. Jesus has entered Jerusalem in a subversive kind of triumph – he has enacted the words of the prophet Zechariah, who had promised that Zion's king would enter Jerusalem triumphant and victorious, 'humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Zech. 9.9; Matt. 21.5). He has been acclaimed by the crowds – which means he is becoming both religiously and politically dangerous.

It gets worse. Jesus drives out those who are buying and selling in the temple, symbolically overturning a highly remunerative religious sacrificial system (Matt. 21.17). When he comes back into the city the following morning, pausing on the way to curse a fig tree (symbolic of Israel) that was failing to bear fruit, he enters the temple once again and begins to teach. The chief priests and elders ask him: 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (Matt. 21.23). On this occasion, Jesus asks them a question in return – about the authority for John the Baptist's ministry. You might remember that the priests and elders can't

agree about a reply. They fear if they deny John's authority as being from heaven they will enrage the crowds who regard John as a prophet, but if they acknowledge it then they will be condemned for not having followed him. So they say they don't know, and Jesus tells them then, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things'. Matthew follows this passage with three pointed parables – the two sons, the wicked tenants, and the parable of the wedding banquet. And then he continues his account of the controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders.

There is something almost comical about this sequence of controversies – as wave after wave of opponents come up with their trick questions for Jesus – I have a vision of naughty school children, conspiring with loud whispers just off-stage to try to trick the teacher. 'Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying ...' (Matt. 22. 15-16). A bit later, the 'same day some Sadducees came to him ... and they asked him a question ...' (Matt. 22. 23). Next week's reading will continue the keystone cop attempts at entrapment: 'When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him' (Matt. 22. 34-35), and then finally Jesus has had enough. 'Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah?"' (Matt. 22. 41). And of course, they can't answer and 'from that day' no-one dared to ask him any more questions (Matt. 22.46).

History, we are told, is written by the victors. Although at the point when he was writing his gospel, Matthew's Christian community could not be considered exactly *victorious*, nevertheless it's clear whose side we are supposed to be on. The so-called authorities are shown up as malicious hypocrites and collaborators; the authority of Jesus is authenticated by his freedom and his capacity to rise above these petty games. It's not so much that he defeats them by better arguments but that he keeps changing the ground on which they stand, refusing to play the game on the terms set. And it's this freedom, the sense that he brings an entirely different

and life-giving perspective, that the crowds and even the Jewish leaders seem to recognise: 'they were amazed', 'they were astounded at his teaching'.

The question of authority is fraught in our time too. Since the 18th century and the emergence of what is called the Enlightenment, Western philosophy has rejected claims to authority based on tradition, force or revelation. The only authority to which free people should submit is the authority of rationality – only if you can be given a reasoned argument or only if reasonable people agree, should you accept any claim to truth or power or moral value. Authority founded exclusively on what 'the Bible says', 'the Pope says', the 'King says' is just not enough anymore.

To this long cultural shift, for us has been added an even more acute distrust of authority because of our experience of massive institutional betrayal. Clergy and churches have betrayed us in many ways, most visibly and horribly by the extent of and complicity with the sexual abuse of children; politics and various politicians have been discovered to be riddled with corruption or self-interest, as have the industrial-military alliances that prosecute war; leaders and professionals from school principals to journalists, business people to scout masters, hospital administrators to judges to senior public servants, have let people down by failures ranging from incompetence to falsehood, criminal abuse to gross self-interest.

As a result, it seems, we have developed increasingly elaborate mechanisms to protect ourselves against 'bad' authority, for holding ourselves and each other accountable for our conduct, leadership and professional output – key performance indicators, performance reviews, police checks (last year, I had three different ones for my roles in ministry), and requirements for continuous reporting. In one aged care organisation I know, every pastoral visit or interaction with a resident is supposed to be followed up by a written 'spiritual assessment' or report on the person's state. Now we all know why this kind of apparatus has developed, and why accountability is important. But there's also a sense in which the accountability cart can come increasingly to drive the vocational horse – so that, in the time a pastoral

carer writes his assessment of a routine visit, he could have visited two more residents; or in the time a school teacher fulfils all the reporting requirements to prove she is doing her job, she could have read a book that gave her life and improved her students' learning.

So what does all this have to do with gospel's insistence on the authority of Jesus? I think it is to do with trust and the practical as well as the spiritual significance of learning how worthily to trust.

I've said we are experiencing a crisis of trust in any kind of authority – and hence spend more and more time being 'accountable'. Notice, though, that this is equally a crisis of trust in ourselves and our capacity to trust worthily. We don't trust *them* – but that means also at some level we don't trust ourselves. Because how can we be sure that we are bestowing our trust worthily? We've got it wrong before, after all.

And this is surely like the dilemma faced by the scribes and elders, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Maybe they were mostly motivated (as Matthew suggests) by self-interest and concern for their own power. But perhaps they were also genuinely concerned that the people of Israel not be led astray by this charismatic and unconventional prophet. They have their mechanisms for checking – their key performance indicators. Does he allow for negotiated co-existence with the Roman empire and its taxation system? Is what he teaches consistent with the Jewish Law? Is he really of God? And how will we tell? From the point of view of the gospels, the tragedy of first century Judaism is that the long-awaited Messiah has come, and the very people whose job it was to recognise him failed to do so. Was that failure *just* because it didn't suit their self-interest? Or was it also because they were deploying the wrong measures for discernment – comically looking at their checklist, while they missed the glory of the living God? And that raises the question of what the 'right' measures would have been – for them and for us.

I want to suggest that becoming people capable of worthily bestowing trust spiritually or in any other context is not primarily about developing external

measures to function as checks and balances, although of course these have their place. Just as important and often neglected is the question of how we grow in judgement and intuition, wisdom and attention. This involves practices like asking open honest questions (notably absent from the Pharisees' approach), deepening our own integrity and authenticity so that we can better sense when something is off-key, listening and patience, taking note of the fruits – not just the obvious measurable ones, but the subtler climate of a community or institution.

Cultivating such practices would make a radical difference to formation for leadership in any or all of our institutions, and for our practices of accountability. It is also absolutely essential for our growth in the spiritual life. This is because ultimately the deeper journey always requires that we go beyond where our 'good reasons' can take us. It demands that we 'let go' what we have known up till now: like the disciples being called to follow Jesus into an unknown future, leaving behind their nets, letting the dead burying their own dead; like the crowds in Jerusalem confronted with a teacher who upset the temple system, but whose presence communicated life.

Of course, it matters that we don't just gullibly follow the first charismatic charlatan that comes our way. But it also matters that when the living God calls us, we can trust ourselves to follow past reason – that we are willing to live, as Meister Eckhart so strikingly puts it, 'without a why'. The crisis of trust in our institutions, while understandable, tends to enmesh us in mechanisms that issue in mediocrity. In the life of faith, it's even more dangerous, blinding us to the presence of the God who cannot be contained in our rules and reasons, whose authority is not of this world.