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From Self-Deception to Humility (Matthew 21.23-32)

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The parable of the two sons, so-called, is part of a finely wrought section of the gospel of Matthew. It comes to us, in this Season of Creation, as we're embarked on a short series called 'On Human Nature' – considering how our relationship with our own nature affects our connection with and care for the natural world. And it raises important issues in this regard – to do with self-deception and self-knowledge, entitlement and humility. In its gospel context, this story pertains particularly to Jesus' argument with the authorities in Jerusalem. My sense is that if we consider it first in this context, we may also see how it speaks to the human condition more generally.

So here's the scene. Jesus tells this parable on the day after he and his disciples have made their triumphal entry into Jerusalem – the entry we celebrate on Palm Sunday, with Jesus riding on a donkey and the crowds crying 'hosanna'. As events are told in Matthew's gospel, everything that happens from that point on involves Jesus enacting a series of signs and fulfilling a series of prophecies concerning the arrival of Israel's Lord. Just prior to the entry, for example, Jesus has stopped at the Mount of Olives, referencing both King David's arrival there in grief because of a conspiracy against him and Zechariah's prophecy that 'the Mount of Olives is ... where the Lord declares he will stand in order to defeat those who have gathered against Jerusalem'. As Stanley Hauerwas remarks, 'Jesus stands [therefore] on the Mount of Olives as one in mourning for Jerusalem, but also as its priest-king destined to bring all nations to the recognition of the God of David'.¹

The entry is then 'an unmistakably political act' which is only intensified as Jesus goes straight to the temple to perform its cleansing, driving out 'all who were

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p.181.

selling and buying' there, overturning the tables of the money changers (Matthew 21.12). The words he speaks as he does this are drawn directly from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah: 'It is written, "my house shall be called a house of prayer', but you are making it a den of robbers". Immediately after this symbolic cleansing, the blind and the lame come to him and he cures them. Again it's important to recognize that these are not just routine miracles – as if a passing bunch of blind and lame people saw their opportunity and mobbed him while they had the chance. Rather, these particular healings help constitute the claim Jesus is making. King David had prohibited the blind and the lame from coming into the temple (2 Sam. 5.8) and 'in Leviticus 21.17 the blind and the lame were prohibited from offering sacrifices to God'. According to Hauerwas, then, the coming of the blind and the lame to Jesus in the temple, represents a true 'overturning the established order by inviting into the temple those who had been [ritually and legally] excluded'.² By this act of healing, Jesus not only recreates the possibility of worship for them, but the meaning of worship for all.

Not surprisingly, then, the religious leaders want to know 'by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority' (Matthew 21.23). Because what's going on here, is not simply someone shaking things up a bit; Jesus is overtly and deliberately enacting a claim to be 'the Lord who is to come'. And he is doing it in such a way as to suggest that the practice of religion in the Jerusalem of his day does not reflect true worship, worship acceptable to God. Says Hauerwas: 'Jesus is the great high priest who has come to restore to Israel the right worship of Israel's God. The chief priests and scribes understand that this is about power'.³

So, they try to entice him into saying something that will allow them to accuse him of blasphemy. Hence their question about the source of his authority. But Jesus outfoxes them with his question about John the Baptist – did his baptism come from heaven or was it of human origin? And they know they're in trouble. If they say,

² Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p.183.

³ Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p.184.

‘from heaven’, then why did they not believe him? If they say, ‘from human origin’, they risk the ire of the crowd. So they refuse to answer. Notice that their deliberation about how to respond to Jesus’ question is not in terms of what they believe to be the truth or untruth of events, but in terms of what their answer will do for them, what its consequences will be. Their real priority, in other words, is not to discern the truth of what God might be doing among them, but to secure their own position. And when someone is not actually interested in the truth, when they’ve predetermined the range of acceptable response, there’s no point wasting your breath on an answer: ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things’, Jesus says (Matthew 21.27).

Significantly, however, he doesn’t just leave it there. Instead, he offers them another opportunity to engage with the truth of what’s unfolding – its real meaning. It comes in the form of a parable, a thought experiment. He begins innocuously, drawing them in. ‘What do you think?’, Jesus says. Imagine there are two sons – the father asked the first to go and work in the vineyard. The son answered, ‘I will not’, but later changed his mind and went. The father went to the second, and said the same. This son looked to be immediately obliging: ‘I go, sir’, but he did not go. ‘Which of the two did the will of his father?’ The first, they replied. Bingo, says Jesus. You get it. But here’s the thing – it turns out this acknowledgement has ramifications for you. Because John the Baptist ‘came to you in the way of righteousness’ – that is he came from the Father – but though you like to think of yourselves as obliging and obedient children, as those who have said ‘I go, sir’ to God, ‘you did not believe him’ and you did not go into the vineyard to do the work. Whereas, the tax collectors and prostitutes, those who on the surface appear to be disobliging and disobedient sons and daughters – in the end, they recognized and heeded the father’s direction. So they are the ones who have ended up doing the will of the father, and they ‘are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you’ (Matthew 21.31).

Well, you can see how confronting, how enraging this analogy must have been for the authorities. But if this parable arises from the particular context of Jesus’

dispute with the religious establishment of his day, is there anything we can draw from it for our context – in particular, for our reflections on human nature and its impact on the natural world?

Well, for me, two things stand out. One is the insight that (in the language of the parable) ‘doing the will of the father’ involves not just saying you’re a good person, not just being well-intentioned, but actually acting in accord with what the father asks. This involves, in turn, the capacity to recognize what is being asked, and it may require a significant change in direction or orientation, the willingness to give up a certain way of being in the world, a certain image of yourself. In a word, conversion. And there’s nothing like thinking you’re already good, already obedient, to get in the way of conversion.

This is the problem for these religious authorities. They have an image of themselves as righteous and good; they’re invested in continuing to see themselves that way. This is a profoundly human trait. And to protect our sense of our own goodness we’re willing to do many things. We’re willing to write off those who will not see us as we present ourselves to be seen; we’re willing to deceive ourselves about our motives or the impact of our actions, to self-justify and defend and obfuscate. It’s not that Jesus needs them (or us) to consider ourselves entirely without merit or goodness. He just wants us to be real. To see ourselves (and let ourselves be seen) whole, to be willing to change. This is what humility means and to be truly humble, to let go our investment in our virtuous self-image in order to respond to a fuller truth, often requires that we go through some experience of failure or loss or exposure which reveals to us our limits and our shadow, leaves us with nothing left to hide, no honour to defend (like the tax collectors and prostitutes).

It seems to me that one of the things that blocks human beings from recognising and truly acknowledging our impact on the natural world is this need to defend a sense of ourselves as ‘good’, as beyond the need for repentance or fuller conversion. We see it in the way the Australian government and others in our society

approach action on climate change (and other issues). There's no need to overturn any tables, buying and selling and exchanging money. There's no need to repent of anything in our way of life or notice those it systematically excludes. And above all, there's no need to concede anything amiss in our sense of our own righteousness – and if self-deception is the price we must pay to maintain our virtuous self-image, we'll pay it. Hence the loud and repeated lie that we are 'meeting and beating' our Paris targets, being fully responsible international citizens – which sounds remarkably like that second son, saying: 'I go, sir', but he did not go.

Jesus' call to conversion is an invitation to get real about ourselves and what we're actually doing. God does not require us to be perfect ... just true. And the good news is that, however long we have been self-deceived and self-justifying, we can still 'change our minds'. And when we do, when we turn humbly and undefendedly, when we give ourselves whole-heartedly to seek the will of God, we are released from the burden of ourselves, able at last to find our place and play our part for the life of the whole.