

## Humility and working out our own salvation in fear and trembling

St. Brandon's

Phil. 2: 1-13; Matt. 21: 23-32

27 September 2020

Last Sunday Alison was preaching from the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a little earlier in Matthew's gospel (20: 1-16). That parable ends with Jesus concluding, 'So, the last will be first, and the first will be last', and Alison said, in the light of that, that 'God challenges us to put down our expectations of our own worth, and attend to those who we are liable to put ourselves ahead of'. And today's readings, I think, lead us to follow up on that challenge.

We've jumped from the beginning of Matthew chapter 20 last week to half-way through chapter 21 this, and quite a lot has happened in the meanwhile. Immediately after 'the last will be first', Jesus sets off to go up to Jerusalem. Amongst other things, He predicts His death and resurrection, heals two blind men on the way, enters triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey (our Palm Sunday), and cleanses the Temple, throwing out the traders and the money-changers. Our reading finds Him the day after cleansing the Temple, entering and teaching in that very same space, the very holiness of the Temple, having in a sense presented Himself to the world as king, judge, healer and teacher. It's hardly surprising, then, that the chief priests and elders of the people want to know by what authority He is doing these things.

We can perhaps imagine the crowd being delighted at this contest, and perhaps willing Jesus to give as good as He gets. And so the question He asks in return – 'did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' – might well have got them almost laughing. 'Ha ha! Great question! What's your answer to *that*, chief priests and elders of the people, eh?' And, of course they have no answer.

But they do then get some kind of answer to their question about authority in the parable Jesus tells next. Another vineyard owner, two sons, one who says he won't work in the vineyard but does, and one who says he will but doesn't. Which of them did the will of the father? And, it seems, it's the chief priests and elders of the people who answer the question, and give the right answer (the first son), and so seemingly condemn themselves in the process. They haven't done the will of the Father because they didn't believe John who came to them 'in the way of righteousness'. But the tax-collectors and prostitutes did believe John, and even though the chief priests and elders of the people saw this, they still didn't believe John. Jesus in effect confirms the authority of John – his baptism was from heaven – and incidentally, because, as the people, if not the chief priests and elders of the people, knew, Jesus was the one to whom John was pointing, confirms His own authority. Jesus is also coming to them in the way of righteousness. Will they believe Him?

I want to touch on this issue of authority again in a moment, but before we leave the parable and the teaching that goes with it, we might note two other things. First, that it was the official religious representatives who got it wrong, and the outcasts of society – the tax-collectors and prostitutes, the 'losers'<sup>1</sup> in society – who got it right. And they didn't need to join the religious establishment to

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<sup>1</sup> I use this term deliberately, partly because it's a Trump-ism, but also because Michael Sandel uses it to compare losers with winners in a powerful lecture on meritocracy and its ill-effects. The lecture includes the theological background to meritocracy and a call to humility (see later in the sermon). The lecture is at:

be justified before God, they just believed, but presumably in a way that demonstrated a genuine change of heart and life. And that can make, and probably should make, us uncomfortable. Which group are we in? Being part of the church inevitably makes us part of the respectable religious representatives of our day, and probably not one of the 'losers' in society. And, as Alison said last week, 'God challenges us to put down our expectations of our own worth, and attend to those who we are liable to put ourselves ahead of'. Mmm.

The second thing that's worth noting, however, is that Jesus says of the tax collectors and prostitutes that they are 'going into the kingdom of God *ahead of* the chief priests and elders of the people. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. But notice 'last', not excluded – the chief priests and elders of the people will still get into the kingdom, just not in the order they might have expected. There is, here, an almost universalist statement – that none shall be excluded, that all shall be saved. And I'll come back to that shortly too.

But back to the question of authority. Jesus, as we've seen, implies that His own authority comes from the one who sent Him, from God Himself, just as John the Baptist's authority had come from God. Jesus similarly implies His own authority when He is challenged by the high priest at His trial: 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?' 'You have said so', Jesus replies (Matt 26: 64). But it is at the end of Matthew's gospel that Jesus says it explicitly, though only to His disciples: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (28: 18) Jesus says just before the great commission.

And that, of course, links to our other reading this morning, where Paul, either in a hymn that he wrote or imported from elsewhere (we don't know), affirms that it is this Jesus whom God has highly exalted, and given 'the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'. All authority has been given to Him. He is a worthy object of our worship and praise. Indeed, with the Father and the Spirit, the only worthy object of our worship and praise. Here is Christianity's unique claim, but also a universal claim – that *every* knee should bend, *every* tongue should confess. Or perhaps 'shall bend and shall confess' if we go back to the origins of that statement in Isaiah: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear' (45: 23) – 'shall' not 'should'. So, again, there's a hint here of a universalist statement – that, eventually all shall bend the knee, all shall be saved. But that's really the subject of a sermon for another time.

Here, we have established the worthy authority and exaltation of Christ – to Him be praise and glory for ever. Amen. But then let's look at the first part of this 'hymn', because Jesus was exalted by virtue of His humility and self-emptying. Although He was, from before creation, in the form of God, He didn't regard that equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself and entered our humanity, taking human form. He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death ... but hold on Paul! You're about the jump to His death. For our purposes, we need to look at His life first.

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[https://www.youtube.com/embed/5LMKg06ndU0?version=3&rel=1&fs=1&autoplay=2&showsearch=0&showinfo=1&iv\\_load\\_policy=1&wmode=transparent](https://www.youtube.com/embed/5LMKg06ndU0?version=3&rel=1&fs=1&autoplay=2&showsearch=0&showinfo=1&iv_load_policy=1&wmode=transparent)

Born of somewhat suspicious parentage; the subject of a death threat as a child and other such threats as an adult; a refugee in Egypt; a good home, but then He became kind of unemployed; and homeless ('the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'); and dependent on the charity of others; He fraternised with the outcasts of society – the tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers; He then got into trouble with the authorities; was betrayed by a friend; became in effect a criminal; was tortured; was tried on trumped-up charges; was rejected by both religious and civil authorities; became an object of derision; was murdered outside the city walls; a scapegoat. In one word, a loser, and a loser who identified, could identify, very closely with all the other losers in society

But a loser who then became first in the Kingdom of God, indeed became *the way* into the kingdom of God. A loser who now leads the way. And we are called to follow this loser Christ who now has all authority in heaven and on earth. Which is why Paul leaves us with two exhortations either side of this 'hymn': 'in humility regard others as better than yourselves' (the last shall be first, and the first shall be last); and 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling'.

Lord have mercy.

Amen