
Sunday 27th September – The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7 & Matthew 21:23-32

Exodus 17:1-7

Water from the rock

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarrelled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.'

Moses replied, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?'

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?'

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.'

The Lord answered Moses, 'Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.' So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Matthew 21:23-32

The authority of Jesus questioned

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?'

Jesus replied, 'I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?'

They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will ask, "Then why didn't you believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin"— we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.'

So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.'

Then he said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

The parable of the two sons

'What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard."

"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go.

'Which of the two did what his father wanted?'

'The first,' they answered.

Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.'

Reflection

Questions, questions, questions..... and some answers.

I was struck that God and Jesus ask searching questions in both these passages. In Exodus the Israelites have been led out of Egypt and are now thirsty. I suspect they thought they might die. I have sympathy with their question about why they had been led out of Egypt in the first place. It seems quite a test of their faith, and if I was one of them I might think it was a bit unfair that the place where this happens was then named "they tested the Lord". However, God did perform a miracle to provide water. Mysterious, and uncomfortable.

I found the passage in Matthew 21 more intriguing. In the first part of the chapter Jesus enters Jerusalem to great fanfare; "The whole city stirs and asks, Who is this?" Having got their attention he then proceeds to the temple, overturns the tables of money changers and those selling doves, heals the blind and lame, then curses a fig tree causing it to wither immediately just because it didn't have any fruit on it. To top it all he says that with faith people could make a mountain throw itself into the sea. Quite an impact, that was difficult to ignore. The priests and teachers of the law were indignant so it's not surprising they ask him "By who's authority do you do all this?" His response? I'll answer if you answer my question. Uncompromising.

With no answer forthcoming he tells a story about two sons, one who said he wouldn't do what he was asked to do, but then did, and one who said he would, but then didn't. Which one did what their father wanted? His question in answer to their question revealed their true intentions, they were acting hypocritically.

Why did Jesus respond to direct questions in this way? In fact why did he do everything he did once he was in Jerusalem, to bring out their questions? He was certainly showing both his humanity and his deity, all motivated by deep love, the driver of his character. It makes me reflect on how God answers questions we ask.

My sense is God always answers our questions appropriately, and ultimately helpfully, but not predictably. He's not afraid to be himself, even if the lesson from Exodus is he won't reveal all his motivations. He can answer in the stillness, in anger, by direct challenge, sometimes leaving us a bit bemused, and sometimes not immediately or obviously better informed or better off. I think he always wants us to learn, whilst knowing we are loved. He isn't concerned with how comfortable we feel during the process. Yet the overall story from the Bible is one of his love and deep care for us, making the ultimate sacrifice. So the unpredictability and potential discomfort in how he responds to our questions shouldn't stop us asking those questions or being afraid of the response, because we know the essence of his character is love for us.

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