

Matthew 21:23-32 - Sermon for 10am

The Christian story of the Gospel is binary. You either believe it or you don't. There's no middle ground. It's not one of those things that can be "take it or leave it" or one of those beliefs that "seems to be good for you but I don't need it thanks very much." You either believe it or you don't. That doesn't mean you don't have doubts, or dark moments – these are a common feature of all humanity – even the most ardent atheist might occasionally find himself worrying that he was wrong. It does mean, however, that you have decided which side of a fence to sit on and you are committed to that side until you find something different.

Our reading this morning about Jesus serves to underline this. Fundamentally, the chief priests and elders of the people are challenged by Jesus as to which side of the fence they are sitting on. And the same challenge is for us today, and it remains a challenge, even if we have been at church all our lives because it can be tempting to let other things get in the way of simply believing that Jesus has the authority of God and therefore we believe in him and do as he says.

The passage just before ours has been a demonstration of Jesus' power and authority. He has been celebrated in kingly style as he entered Jerusalem, he has prophetically cleansed God's house, the Temple, of all the dodgy dealings that had begun there, and then he has demonstrated the power of prayer – a signature of God's authority within him. No wonder the Elders of the people were concerned about where he was getting all this stuff! It's not really a bad question either. I'd hate to think anyone just took what I said as Gospel truth without stopping to ask where I was getting it from – hence the insistence that having your bibles open for yourselves is a good plan!

However, the problem is that the Chief priests had already rejected John the Baptist, the prophet that came as a forerunner of Jesus, and Matthew paints this enquiry as a question with a hidden agenda. Jesus was causing a stir and they needed to bring him into line or silence him.

It looks, on the face of it, like Jesus was just deliberately awkward in his response to their question, and many sermons have been preached about why he couldn't give a straight answer and fall into their trap of either being side-lined or charged with blasphemy. However, Jesus' answer, I think, is more that just some smart-alec way of getting out of a tricky spot.

Jesus deliberately brings in John the Baptist and presents the same options to the Elders as they presented to him effectively. It's binary – there's no sitting on the fence. They either believe that John was speaking on behalf of God or he wasn't. Refusing to admit their disbelief, and trapped by public opinion, they had nowhere to hide except to feign ignorance. They tried to sit on the fence. I can't prove this, but my guess is that if they were genuinely confused and honestly seeking truth, Jesus would have been more sympathetic. He was with others, like Nicodemus, who was trying to find an answer but just needed some help. But with this bunch, Jesus pulled no punches. With such a blinkered and blind approach, why should Jesus give himself away to be arrested for blasphemy?

But it doesn't end with an unsatisfactory sitting on the fence. Belief in Jesus is binary. Jesus actually does start answering their question, but in the form of a few stories; one of which was also in our reading. Very simply, Jesus presents two contrasting sons, both of which are far from perfect, and both of which react to their father's authority differently. There's one who paid lip service to his father, said the right things, and then ignored what he was asked to do. And then there's the one who initially rebelled against his father's authority but changed his mind and obeyed in the end.

One son tried to placate the father but didn't act, and the other was rude and disrespectful and then changed his mind.

The Chief Priests were then asked the rhetorical question which must have felt like a thumping hammer-blow as they realised too late what was being said – which son did the will of his father? There's only one answer. There's no worming out of it. You can quibble about the imperfections of the initial rejection, but fundamentally there's only one son who worked in the vineyard.

How the tables had been turned. From trying to catch Jesus out and undermine his teaching, the Elders and Chief Priests found themselves looking silly and exposed. Jesus hammered it home that even those stereotypical sinners – the tax collectors and prostitutes – the ones who were considered worse than the worst, the untouchable sinners, were getting into God's Kingdom ahead of them. These "sinners" were the ones who had rebelled initially, but who heard John the Baptist's preaching and changed their ways completely and followed the way of God. The Chief Priests and Elders were left as the lip-service son; the one who was in the end disobedient because they rejected John and his authority, and now they were rejecting Jesus and his.

There was no room for middle ground. They either had to accept the authority of Jesus or reject it. There was no sitting on the fence for them, and there's no sitting on the fence for us either. And it is shocking for them and for us too, that this condemnation is being meted out to the religious elite. Of course, our initial reaction is to distance ourselves from them completely. These were the ones who were out to get Jesus and from the distance of 2000 years, they must have been rotten to the core. But distancing ourselves to the point of pointing our fingers and condemning them too is just too easy, and in fact is very like what they were doing to Jesus. So let's think some more.

You see, there are various ways of rejecting or ignoring the authority of Jesus; of seeking to undermine or side-line his teaching. There's the ways of the Chief Priests and Elders of the people, and then there's also the ways of the prostitutes and tax collectors.

The Chief Priests and elders could side-line Jesus by just questioning who he is. If Jesus had responded to their question that his teaching was just human morality that he'd picked up somewhere and repackaged then he would no longer cause a problem to them. He'd have been seen as a controversial but harmless moral reformer of his day. It might have been uncomfortable, but he was only human after all and could just be dismissed as just a slightly eccentric "good man" and moral teacher. And this is a common way of rejecting Jesus today too. To reduce him to simply one of history's great (but now dead and outdated) moral teachers.

The other way of rejecting him as the elders is to just pay lip-service, like the second son in the story. This is more difficult for us in a church context. This exchange comes in Matthew in the middle of a section of exchanges and questions along similar lines and leads on to Jesus' statement that the greatest command is to love God with all our whole heart, mind and soul in chapter 22. If we are truly not paying lip-service, then we must be loving God with our whole being, absolutely and completely. There is no sitting on the fence and there's no holding anything back. Anything else is just empty words - lip-service. Personally, I think this is perhaps the biggest danger for any of us who have come to church for a long time. Have we lost this perspective and just settled for Sunday attendance as our obedience to God? Or are we fully and completely signed up to working in God's vineyard as I talked about last week, finding out what our master wants to say to us by studying our bibles (even at home!), praying that God will help us to follow him every single moment of every day? Anything else is lip service from the second son in the story.

The final way of rejecting Jesus' authority is to end up like the chief priests; so keen on their religiosity that they miss the main event. These religious elite knew how to do all the rituals, loved it, and probably thought this was the way to honour and serve God. But over time, they had become so interested in their religious-ness that they had lost sight of what God was doing. The main even, Jesus, passed them by, and they were so taken up with preserving their religious life the way they had done it for generations that they ended up rejecting God himself. Isn't it terrifying that there can now be "Sunday gatherings" which look like church services, for atheists. Heaven forbid that we might fall into that trap, that our church services become more about meeting together and ritual than about meeting Jesus and sharing our faith.

The final way of rejecting Jesus is to remain a prostitute and tax collector. Jesus clearly loved the fact that even the lowest of the low could enter God's Kingdom, no matter what they had done in the past. But this required a change of mind and belief in Jesus. Isn't it great that no matter what we have done, whether it is "really bad stuff" or only a bit bad stuff, we are still invited to believe in Jesus and receive life in God's Kingdom, now and in the future.

This means that for all of us, for the first time, or maybe the hundredth time, we are invited to get off the fence and believe in Jesus, and become transformed in mind and life into followers of him. The great thing about Jesus' story is that he leaves the option open for everyone. Obviously the way is open for those who recognise they need to follow God's way. But the way is also open for the Chief Priests and Elders; for those who recognise that their religiosity has replaced God, those who recognise, along with me, that they have no committed themselves to God with the whole heart, soul and mind, and those who had previously just put Jesus down as a good teacher. No matter where we have come from and what we have believed before, God simply waits for us to open up to him, tell him where we've been and ask him to help us to go forward from today with Jesus. The door is open; God is waiting; will we walk through or will we not? The only thing we can't do is sit on the fence. Amen.