LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY OCTOBER 1st
Reading: Matthew 21: 23 - 32 [Pentecost 17]

Jesus is now in Jerusalem (since the beginning of chapter 21) where he must confront the powers and their traditions. Earlier in this same chapter he has driven from the Temple those doing an unjust trade and overturned the tables of the unscrupulous money changers. At verse 23 Jesus "*enters the Temple courts*" and the reader knows it is for a final time. Since childhood Jesus has made these pilgrimage trips to Jerusalem for the festivals three times a year. Thus begins what the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary describes as "*a series of confrontations in which Jesus' opponents attempt to trap him*" [Matthew, page 408]. We know how this is going to end.

The Temple and people's practices surrounding it had been 'the authority'. In Luke's story it is clear that the question of Jesus' authority comes after his cleansing of the temple. In fact there, the question is, "*By what authority are you doing these things*"? [emphasis mine]. Remember now, that for Matthew's community after the Year 70, the Temple is gone. The Roman army has invaded Jerusalem and razed it to the ground. It is no longer even possible to have the Temple as the centre of the practice of faith.

Jesus has previously claimed for himself the power to forgive sins [9:8]. We know he is getting deeper and deeper into trouble with the Temple authorities, to whom Matthew adds 'the Pharisees'. In his "First Thoughts on Passages from the Lectionary" Emeritus Professor Bill Loader comments, "*Such 'charismatic' authority was outside of the control of the order established by the Law, by Scripture*". By chapter 26 of Matthew's story these are the very same people who plot Jesus' death (26:3).

Evident behind the 'trap' set by the chief priests and elders about '*by whose authority*?' is a challenge to all Jesus has claimed. We need the reminder that in a very much more structured society than ours, where social behaviours ran by unwritten rules, the issue of authority is a much more significant one. Who should speak, even what they should say or claim, had coded expectations. This has been evident throughout the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus has exhibited 'authority;' in his teaching and in performing healings. Indeed, The New Interpreters' Commentary notes that the '*climax of the Gospel*' comes as Jesus declares that God has given him all authority [Matthew 28: 18 – 20].

Jesus' answer to their question is more than a clever piece of verbal trickery.   By asking "*from where did John the Baptist get authority?*", and, by implication, therefore, all the recognised prophets get theirs, Jesus puts his questioners in the position of having to reject their own prophets. In effect, then Jesus asks are they going to, in denying his authority, cast aside the whole of their own tradition? The religious leaders are caught, and Matthew provides the details of them "*discussing it among themselves*" [verse 25]. Not only are they caught without an answer, but the watching crowds, and even, by extension, the congregations for whom Matthew writes, see their dilemma. As Eugene M Boring underlines in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, "*the crowd, which has played a positive role throughout the narrative, but has not yet definitely decided for or against Jesus* (as evidenced in their question, "Who is this" in the Palm Sunday parade – see Matthew 21: 10 – 11).

Jesus gives his opponents the answer to his challenge in the possibilities he puts before them. Was John's authority, like his, "*from heaven*" he asks.   Ever since some elements of the church have revered Jesus as having "*all authority*" without ever asking 'to do what?' The answer that Jesus' authority "*comes from Heaven*" points us to God. It is God-given and therefore, God who we should fear and worship.

As is typical, Jesus then goes on to demonstrate with a parable, a middle eastern means of placing the hearer in the picture. The story of the son who defies his father's expectations, but then goes to work in the vineyard contrasted with the son who obediently agrees but did not go is uniquely Matthean, '*saturated*

with Matthean vocabulary, style and themes" [to quote the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, page 411]. It makes Jesus' point harder to escape; a plea of 'we don't know" is harder to justify.

Bill Loader (above) notes that this and the following further two parables of the Vineyard workers rejecting the owner [21: 33 – 46] and the great supper [22: 1 – 14] each address, in turn, the people's response to John, their response to Jesus and finally, to the disciples and their mission.

Clearly behind this text is a local dispute pertinent specifically to Matthew's community. It is a dispute about the order of take-up of this new religion. People are being excluded from the synagogue. Matthew wants to assure them that their new faith in God is valid. We don't face these same issues today, yet our history bears tragic consequences of people interpreting these words as Christian followers being given God's favour against his supposedly former elected people, the Jews, and finding in the parable their guilt for the death of Jesus. This is one of the most pertinent passages for the dangers of a simplistic reading of scriptures, unattached from their historical and cultural context.

So what then are we to make of the passage? .The warning remains for us that the blessings of God are not 'titled' to a few, with exclusive belonging rights. The way to God in Jesus, acknowledging his authority is not a matter of privilege or position, but doing the deeds he calls us to, acts of grace and compassion. This is a theme of Matthew's Gospel – doing of deeds of righteousness [think of the definitive parable of sheep sorted from the goats]. There is no resting on laurels in the Kingdom, no self-satisfaction in what we know (or think we know). .Closer to our own time, the 19th century American writer and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed something similar in his words, "*What you are shouts so loudly in my ears I cannot hear what you say.*"