

## 20140928SixteenthAfterPentecostSermon

I return today after have had three weeks leave – leave which I hoped would give me an opportunity to do nothing stressful, leave to give me the chance to get my family tree up to date. Well, week one I was finishing of my marking for TEE College, week two the dear Tax man decided I should be audited and so I spent most of that week preparing all the data to hand over to SARS and week three was mourning my sister, Jean's death. But in between I was able to add about hundred more names to my family tree.

As you have heard from me in the past no doubt *ad infinitum*, I'm a genealogist and love researching family trees. I believe that we cannot know who we are until we have found out where we come from, learnt something about the personalities of our ancestors. There is a BBC television series which researches the families of celebrities. It is amazing to hear of the ancestors of some famous politician or actor, to see how they might have come from poor agricultural labourer stock or from blacksmiths or factory labourers and yet there descendents have made good. The programmes name is *Who do you think you are?*

I thought about that when I read through this morning's Gospel. The chief priests and the elders are definitely asking Jesus, "**Who do you think you are?!!**" They wanted to know what gave Jesus the right to do and say what he was saying in the holy place of the temple. We must remember the context of this reading. On the day before this encounter, Jesus had come into the holy city surrounded by a great crowd exalting him as king. And according to Matthew he then went from the streets into the Temple and overturned the tables of those who were carrying out their trade, which was proper and serviced the needs of pilgrims and worshippers. Then here Jesus was again, this time—as will become obvious—setting himself up to teach in this holy precinct. **Who do you think you are?**

But Jesus turns the tables on those who challenge his authority by posing a difficult question: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Now that was a complex question for them to answer. Jesus is asking, "Who do you think John was, where did his authority come from?" John promised forgiveness of sins to those who were baptised. Now that was a challenge to the religiously important people who belonged to the Temple. They were the ones who insisted it was sacrifices in the Temple that took sins away. So, if they now say John was doing God's work that places everything they do and hold dear in an awkward position. But, if on the other hand, they say John was a charlatan, the crowd would criticise them because the ordinary people thought John was a holy man. Also remember that Jerusalem was a city full of Roman soldiers expecting trouble and who knows what disorder might lead to. The chief priests and elders decided to say nothing — how that must have galled them, these proud characters who, like all clergy, usually had a lot to say for themselves.

Then Jesus really puts them under pressure. He turns the "**Who do you think you are?**" question on to his questioners, but in a story—a story of two sons. Now stories of two sons are a familiar theme in Jewish tradition, we just need to think of Cain and Abel, and Esau and Jacob, and that makes this little parable all the more powerful to everyone who hears it that day. It's a tale about a father giving work instructions for the vineyard to his two sons; one refuses to do the work but eventually does do it, and the other readily says he'll do it but doesn't.

A simple story of grape growers — except, of course, it isn't. The listeners all know this is really about who are God's people which is demonstrated by the choices people make: who does what the Father wills? **Who do you think you are?** Do you think you are doing the Father's will? The way the story is told, the chiefs priests and the elders have to admit that the son who said "no" is the one who did the father's will: but they admit it through clenched teeth because they know where this argument is going.

Jesus hammers the point home: notorious sinners—those who had originally said "no" to God — will take their places in the lush and joyful vineyard of the Father because when they heard John's call to repentance they responded. And the religious elite? Well, they're still outside the fence, wistfully looking over it and wondering

whether the delights of the vineyard will ever be theirs. John came in the way of righteousness, says Jesus, but they refused to recognize it — just as they are refusing to recognize that same righteousness in Jesus himself.

**Who do you think you are?** They thought themselves children of Abraham, but John said God could raise up children of Abraham from stones if he wanted to! What a turnaround. John's baptism puts a question mark against all those generations of circumcision, sacrifice, and purity laws. John was dead and gone — but his invitation to experience God's forgiveness doesn't die because Jesus won't let it. Jesus still offers the invitation; still lives its freedom; still lives its grace, still remains obedient to the Father's will. And that's more than the chief priests and elders can take. No wonder that on Friday of the same week they take counsel together to put Jesus to death.

We've got to think about this incident careful. **Who do you think you are?** Who do you identify with in this Temple court? Those who do the will of the Father? Probably ... but remember how they are characterized here. No, I don't just mean the generic tax collectors and prostitute label. For example, let's consider the circumstances of the family triangle in the parable? The story is set in a peasant village where the houses are rudimentary and most activity takes place outdoors. The concept of privacy didn't exist, and the rules of social place and honour applied in every circumstance. For the first son to actually say "no" to his father was a deeply shaming thing because everyone knew about it, everyone commented on his lack of respect. Also, the father was derided for his lack of authority, so the whole family was the subject of gossip. In other words although the son eventually does the Father's will it as at great cost to the Father's prestige and standing in the community. Is the parable telling us how costly it is for the Father to give his children the freedom to find out who they think they are for themselves? Shades of the Parable of the Prodigal Son come to mind.

**Who do you think you are?** A naysayer like the first son in the parable? — well, yes. Or perhaps, a fearful disciple who's 'yes' becomes 'no' at a crucial moment, like Peter? — well, also yes. A hypocrite like the tax collector whose devious secrets and practices give the lie to all outward show of respectability? — well, yes. In these, and many things we must admit the reality of our all too human, human reality — the sin that clings so easily, that comes to hand and heart so easily, that is so destructive — that too often just seems natural to us.

But Jesus doesn't do what comes naturally. He does the Father's will. He does what love chooses, and that means determination, resolve, and free choice. The mind that was in Christ we heard of in the Philippians reading has an implied comparison, and that comparison is with the stereotypical person; let's call him 'Adam':

Christ like Adam was a being in the image of God,  
like Adam he was in human shape,  
but unlike Adam  
he did not think equality with God was something to be exploited,  
he took the role of being God's servant,  
he humbled himself,  
he was obedient even to point of death.

In all these things Christ did the opposite of Adam, the typical human being. That was his mind; that was his determination. 'Let that mind be in you,' says Paul. And hear as good news—gospel—that when you fail in that noble thought you can turn, be transformed by God's grace, and do the Father's will. Then you will know who you are.

*With ideas from <http://www.preacherrhetorica.com/proper-21a.html>*

Let us pray: A prayer using words of a hymn by Carolyn Gillette

Once a father told his children,  
"Go and do your daily chores.  
Go and work out in my vineyard;  
All that's mine will soon be yours."  
One responded, "I won't do it!"  
Then he changed his mind and went.  
One said, "Yes! Just send me to it!"  
But he went back home again.

Once a church was filled with Christians  
Who were proud and feeling blessed.  
"God has called us and we've answered!  
We have truly answered, "Yes!"  
On a chilly Sunday morning,  
When a homeless man came by,  
They said, "Go! It's not yet storming!  
God is love — he will supply."

Once a woman, quite the sinner,  
Struggled deep in pain and doubt.  
As she passed that church in winter,  
There she saw that man walk out.  
He was homeless, worn and weary,  
So she stopped her car and said,  
"I'm no saint but you look hungry —  
Let's go buy some soup and bread."

God of love, you call your children;  
Some say, "No!" and some say, "Yes!"  
Lord, forgive us for our judging  
Who will be among the blessed.  
For your kingdom is surprising;  
Some you call will not obey;  
Those we find ourselves despising  
May be those who seek your way.

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