

Proper 21

(Sunday between 25 September and 1 October inclusive)

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Principal Service readings

Ezekiel 18.1-4, 25-32	Individual responsibility
Psalms 25.1-8	Hymn to God's sovereignty
Philippians 2.1-13	Preserve unity in humility
Matthew 21.23-32	The authority of Jesus; parable of the two sons

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The authority of Jesus is challenged

²³ When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' ²⁴ Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?"' ²⁶ But if we say, "Of human origin," we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Parable of the two sons

²⁸ 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." ²⁹ He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.'

Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.’³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.’

Matthew 21.23-32 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

The leaders of the people like to make judgements when it suits them, but they don’t like being put on the spot. Jesus plays them at their own game in refusing to disclose the source of his authority. And yet, the question is raised for us: what authority do we give to Jesus – the authority of a human leader or the authority of the divine Son of God?

Jesus has driven out the traders in the Temple (Matthew 21.12-17), so it is natural that there will be a reaction. This whole section (to 22.14) can be seen as one of challenge and counter-challenge about where authority lies.

Jesus implicitly relates his ministry to that of John the Baptist, who was listened to by the people and accorded the status of prophet. The critics of Jesus don’t dispute with him about the content of his teaching, but they want to find a way to dismiss what he has to say.

The parable of the two sons is simple but powerful and to the point. It is aimed at the hypocrisy of the leaders who don’t live according to their word. Jesus is saying: let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’. How do we ourselves fare in this comparison? Do our actions match our words?

Who were those who said ‘no’ but then repented of it and changed not just their mind but their actions? The tax-collectors and prostitutes – these are the ones who respond to Jesus’ teaching. But the professional leaders of the people, while remaining polite in words, do not have matching actions. Luke’s gospel mentions the tax-collectors who were baptized with John’s baptism, and the Pharisees and lawyers who declined to be baptized (Luke 7.29-30). What can we do to make our actions match and amplify our words?

Quotations

1

I have long since come to believe that people never mean half of what they say, and that it is best to disregard their talk and judge only their actions.

Dorothy Day, 1897–1980. *The Long Loneliness*, 1952

2

We ascend to the heights of contemplation by the steps of action.

St Gregory the Great, c.540–604. *Morals*, xxxi, 102

3

‘There are, indeed, two types of human beings: the pharisees and the publicans,’ said the Master after reading the parable of Jesus.

‘How does one recognize the pharisees?’

‘Simple. They are the ones who do the classifying!’ said the Master.

Anthony de Mello, 1931–87. *One Minute Nonsense*. 1992. sec.140

Related topics

For further study:

Repentance; Forgiveness; Conversion; Self-righteous legalism; Eucharist; Sin (personal, social, and systemic); Sacrament of reconciliation; Grace; The reign of God; The mystery of the church; Dignity of human persons; Christology; Faith and works; Prayer; Contemplation and action; Social teaching of the church; Morality

Closing Prayer

God of truth,
you look not on the promises we make
but on our keeping of what was promised.
Renew us, we pray you, in heart and spirit,
so that what was affirmed and pledged in our baptism
may be fulfilled in lives of faith and love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord,
whose glory is one with you and the Holy Spirit
one God, for ever and ever.

Collect for Proper 21, Year A²

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² *Celebrating the Christian Year : Prayers and Resources for Sundays, Holy Days and Festivals, Years A, B and C /* compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. Norwich : Canterbury Press, 2004-2005.