

Reflection from the Revd Ali Massey for Trinity 16

Voltaire once said, that one ought to judge a person by their questions rather than their answers. An interesting concept when we think about this passage in Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus taught, healed, and shared his life not only with the 12 but with all the other people that he met. All those seemingly casual encounters along the way. As Jesus travelled and ministered people asked him questions. Many different kinds of questions. Questions about God, about the law, interpretation of the law, practical questions and questions of doxology and eternity.

Both John the Baptist and Pilate asked questions about Jesus' identity. John asked Jesus if he is the one that Israel has been waiting for, and later Pilate asked him if he is the king of the Jews. The scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, the chief priests and elders of the temple, all asked him questions about authority. They asked him for proof or signs and wonders. And they tried to trap him into committing blasphemy with their questions.

The 12 asked him who is the greatest. What would they receive by being his disciples? How many times must they forgive and other self-serving questions. With the exception of John, and perhaps Pilate, those who question Jesus either want to trap him, impress him or receive something from him.

What is interesting, is that Jesus always replied to every type of question in a way that revealed something of the kingdom of heaven. Something about the nature of God and how we all can have a relationship with the God of love through him.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus responds to the question about his authority with a question. He asks the chief priests and the elders of the temple if the baptism of John was from heaven or was it from John himself. By answering the question with a question, Jesus, instead of springing the trap that they are hoping will catch him, turns their trap so they are facing it instead. The chief priests and the elders discuss the question amongst themselves and decide not to answer. They don't want to incriminate themselves in front of the gathered crowd. Jesus doesn't answer their question either, but instead he tells them the parable of the 2 sons.

One son who says that he will do what his father asks but then doesn't, and the one who says he won't do as his father asks, but then changes his mind and does what his father requested.

I wonder, if by telling this parable, Jesus is challenging the elders and priests to ask the question of themselves – which of those sons that Jesus describes is me? Am I the one who says the right thing, pretends to be obedient, but then totally ignores the father's request? Or am I the one who everyone considers to be the feckless one, the black sheep of the family, but who in the end does what is needed? Answering that question honestly is a risk and the answer can make us vulnerable.

This year, the global pandemic has meant that taking risks and being vulnerable has come into sharp focus for all of us. We have had to re-think what being church is all about when we cannot meet in person. We have had to think about how to keep each other as safe as possible. We have had to assess our individual and corporate risks and to quite publicly declare our vulnerabilities.

But Christians have always been risk takers, and because we are prepared to take risks following Christ we sometimes are vulnerable. The obvious example is of our sisters and brothers around the world for whom being a Christian brings them into mortal danger. We pray for their safety and courage to continue being the light of Christ in very dark places.

But even in this country, declaring ourselves followers of Jesus means we are counter cultural. We gather to worship the God that over 50% of our friends, neighbours and communities deny exists. We make ourselves vulnerable by acts of service, by caring for others when the cost to ourselves may be high. By being brave enough to put our heads up over the parapet and declare the good news of the kingdom of God. To speak truth to power when we see injustice. To advocate for the voiceless and to come alongside those that society deems unworthy.

So I wonder, is Jesus challenging all of us to take a risk and to be vulnerable by engaging with the parable? Can we ask ourselves which son am I? And to be honest with our answers.

As a priest, this is a really challenging parable to respond to. I would imagine that most people think that most priests are good all the way through. That if you cut us in half, goodness would be running through us like sticks of rock. But I am human, as we all are. There are days when I

struggle with my vocation, when I long to be 'normal'. I have struggled when God challenges me with God's word as God challenges us all. Sometimes I feel that I am like the first son. I have committed myself to this life, to God and to you but there is part of me that does want to run away and live a different life - one that the world sees as more 'normal'. But then, perhaps I am also like the second son. I do come back to what I need to do and the work does get done. But in all, I thank God that God knows me and loves me and forgives me for the times when I struggle. Forgives me for times when I don't want to answer the phone or when the sofa is more inviting than a pile of 'worthy' books. Perhaps this dichotomy might be true for all of us? But the great good news is that Jesus understood what it was to be human, to be fallible, and loves us anyway! After sharing the parable, Jesus then returns to talk again about John the Baptist. He challenges the religious leaders with the truth of the impact that John's life and ministry had on others. "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God before you. 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".

John, the one whose voice had declared the way of the Lord in the wilderness and who preached repentance, was unrecognized by those in authority in the temple. They didn't believe him, but the ordinary people, the folk like you and me did recognize and believe John, and their lives were changed forever. Which son were they? Which son are we?

And that is our challenge today. Which son are we? It doesn't matter which son we have been in the past. It only matters which son we decide to be today. God forgives us all that is past if we repent, because God loved us so much, that even when we were still far off, God came to meet us in his Son our Saviour Jesus Christ. To offer each of us the chance to have a new relationship with God. So when God asks us that most perfect of questions 'will you do the work that I ask you to do?'. The answer is up to us.

Amen