

Nigel Rode : Sermon Sunday 28th September 2014

Readings : Ezekiel 18:1-4, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

I feel somewhat sure that most of us at some time will have read Sherlock Holmes, Maigret, Inspector Morse, or similarly watched a scene in a film or tv programme, when the police finally catch up with their man and the questioning begins.

“Where were you last night?” Why were you in that street at that time of night?” “Where had you come from?” “Where were you going?” “Who did you see?” “Why were you so worried when we stopped you?”

But the question that they really want to ask is “Did you commit the murder?”

They can't ask it yet, because they don't want to use those words too soon. If the suspect isn't the murderer but knows something about it, this might give the game away. If he is the murderer, then a direct question would certainly get a response of “No” and then everything else would be useless. They need to come with a barrage of other questions to get him talking. To get him either telling the truth or twisting around in so many lies that they will catch him out sooner or later. Then the truth will come out.

In our Gospel reading this morning, is another of those discussions between the Pharisees and Jesus. It occurs just after Jesus has cured blind and lame people and chased the money changers and animal sellers from the Temple; both businesses providing necessary services in the Temple, but needing the approval of the religious authorities to operate in the Temple. Only temple currency could be used in the temple, so foreign currency had to be converted to temple currency, albeit at outrageous rates of exchange. Animals that were offered for sacrifice had to be free of blemishes, as determined by the temple authorities. Both of these services evolved into profitable enterprises, so it is not surprising that the chief priests and elders were upset. They wanted to know who gave Jesus the power to perform miracles and the authority to do what he did, but the question they really wanted to ask Jesus was “So do you think you are the Messiah?” All the other

questions they ask him, and all Jesus' answers, are whirling around this central question. But why?

The answer is this : it was the Messiah who would have authority over the Temple. Jesus, let's face it, had walked in and behaved as if he owned the place. Here he was, a country boy from Galilee, coming to the big, smart capital city. He walked into its holiest shrine, which had been ruled for centuries by the chief priests who considered themselves to be so righteous that they were doing God's work, and for a few moments, he took it over. Just who did he think he was?

The only person who might conceivably have greater authority in the Temple than the high priest was God's anointed king, the Messiah – that is if and when he showed up. Nobody knew when that would be. Other would-be messiahs had come and gone in the past. Now here was Jesus behaving as though he had the right to do what only the Messiah could do. So, naturally, they ask him: by what right are you doing all this? And who gave you that right?

Jesus' reply is a master stroke. It both is, and isn't, a straight answer. It certainly is not a trick, designed to get them muddled or embarrassed, though it succeeded in doing just that. Imagine the crowd standing around watching what could turn into a police investigation or arrest, turning instead into a high-pressure and high-profile public debate, with the upstart from the country leaving the sophisticated city folk mumbling that they don't know the answer to his question. Jesus' question about John the Baptist puts them on the spot, so that whichever answer they give, they will be in trouble. But, that is not all. The question about John is the clue to the answer Jesus could make, but doesn't yet, to their question. If the Jewish leaders truly understood what John had been doing, and had known that Jesus had been anointed by God, with the Holy Spirit, through John's baptism, then they would know where Jesus got the right to behave as Messiah in the Temple courts.

But Jesus doesn't just leave it there – he tells a story about a father asking his son's to do a day's work in the family vineyard.

One replied, "No, I won't!", yet later he changed his mind and put in a good day's work. The other said politely, "Yes, father. Certainly, father" but he never went near the vineyard all day.

"Which son", asked Jesus, "did what his father wanted?"

This story was told as an answer to those priests and elders who denied that Jesus was speaking on behalf of God. Jesus went on ask what they thought about the preaching of his cousin, John the Baptist – was this inspired by God, or not?

They didn't dare answer, because John had been popular with all classes of society. The priests and elders, as religious people, were the guardians of morality and despised those like the tax collectors and prostitutes who didn't live up to the high moral standards of the Old Testament law. In a word, they were total unloving.

Now neither of the sons in Jesus story was perfect. But the son who spoke fine words, yet didn't carry them out in practice, was much worse than the one who rudely said no, but then did as his father asked. The first son represents the religious zealots; the second represents those they condemned. So Jesus publicly brought those self-righteous priests and elders down a peg, and the crowd of bystanders must have laughed.

The challenge of this passage for us today is partly this: to make sure that we are responding to Jesus, allowing him to confront us at any point where we have been like the second son and said "Yes" to God while in fact going off in the other direction.

That's important, but it's not the only important thing.

What we should also be asking is : What should we, as Jesus followers, be doing today that would challenge the powers of the present world with the news that He is indeed it's rightful Lord?

and

What should we be doing that would make people ask us "By what right are you doing that?" – to which our answer should be to tell, not riddles about John the Baptist, but stories about Jesus himself?

In closing I leave with you the thought that we should all be praying for the strength in our belief to rise to that challenge.

Amen