



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

27 September 2020: Eucharist Sermon

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Philippians 2:1–13, Matthew 21: 23-32

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This story starts with a commotion.

Staff running. Doors banging. Loud knocking. All around the Temple precincts.

No shouting though – only whispers from the staff as the priests and elders came to their doors.

‘Come quick! There’s trouble! He’s back!’

‘Him again?’ asked one elder as he put his sandals on.

‘What’s he up to this time?’ sighed a junior chief priest as he grabbed his cloak.

‘This is the last straw!’ huffed Caiaphas the High Priest, striding importantly across the courtyard.

One by one, the elders and the chief priests gathered in the Temple.

They huddled together, looking suspiciously over their shoulders. There, indeed, he was again. That scruffy provincial rabbi. Jesus. Sitting in one of their elegant porticoes as if he owned the place – as if he had any right to be there – with equally scruffy, dirty locals crowding around.

‘What do the people see in him?’ hissed one of the priests.

‘That rabble?’ replied another. ‘They’ll follow anyone. Don’t you remember the Baptist?’

There was a collective shudder. They all remembered John the Baptist.

‘At least he’s only talking,’ said Samuel. ‘Small mercies after yesterday’s mess.’

‘But what’s he teaching?’ retorted Jonathan. ‘And whatever it is, he’s doing it in our Temple. We can’t have this.’

The others nodded. Describing yesterday as a mess was an understatement. Doves everywhere, tables thrown down, people screaming, birds roosting in the rafters, money flying into every corner – and in the centre of it all, Jesus, shouting as loudly as anyone.

The priests had cowered. They were ashamed to admit it, but they had. It had been terrifying. After a couple of hours Jonathan and his father Annas had got up the courage to go in – to ask him what he thought he was doing. And Jesus had quoted Scripture at them, made them feel about five years old, and then... just left. Gone home, or wherever it was he went. The vergers had had an awful time clearing up and the priests had slunk about for the rest of the day in shame. Surely there was more they could have done? Maybe if they had all stood together...

Now, though, they were all there. A united front. They squared their shoulders and stalked in.

Jesus looked up with a smile. 'Come, join us!' he said. 'There's plenty of room.'

The sheer insolence of the man made Annas see red. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' he spluttered, gesturing widely, meaning yesterday's bizarre behaviour – throwing tables about and that ridiculous pantomime on the donkey – as well as whatever he was doing today. 'And who gave you this authority?'

Jesus smiled; it wasn't a very nice smile. 'My question first. Remember John the Baptist?'

Some of the priests shifted uneasily and caught one another's eye.

'Where did his baptism come from? Heaven or humans?'

They stopped.

They shuffled.

They looked at each other.

'He was a troublemaker!' whispered one. 'We can't be seen to be supporting him. Imagine what the authorities would do.'

'He was right, though' said another, doubtfully. 'I mean, we do need to repent. Don't we?'

'The people certainly think so.' came the reply. 'Ignorant little man that he was, I don't think we want to risk saying he had nothing to do with heaven. Not here amongst the hoi polloi.'

'But – he was a prophet, wasn't he?' said Nicodemus. 'He can't have been anything else.'

'He was causing instability.' said Caiaphas, as if that settled it. It didn't.

Gradually, the chief priests began to realise that they didn't know where John's authority had come from. They hadn't even asked themselves that question. Was he causing trouble? Yes. Was it politically wise to support him? Certainly not. What would people think of them based on how they approached the John the Baptist problem? Those were the questions they'd asked themselves. But the real question – where John had come from, whether John's baptism was a gift and a calling from God –

they had dismissed completely as if it wasn't even there. God didn't work like that. There weren't any prophets any more.

But what if there were?

Finally, someone looked back at Jesus. 'We don't know,' he said. He'd meant it to sound definitive, defiant, as if he was in charge here, but his voice cracked and he shivered. He didn't know where John's authority had come from and suddenly that seemed to matter.

'H'm.' said Jesus, nodding. 'You didn't answer mine, so I can't answer yours. But I will tell you a story. What do you think of this? A man had two sons...'

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I don't often read the Gospels through the chief priests' eyes. I often dismiss them as pantomime villains – as just antagonists – necessary to the plot, but not really people. But this isn't a tightly plotted story. This is truth. And the people whose paths crossed Jesus' were real people. Real people, with real motivations. Perhaps some of it was real hatred of Jesus; but not all of it. For some of them, just snobby dismissal of a 'scruffy provincial rabbi' – what on earth could he have to say to the senior clergy of the whole country?

Or conservatism: they've been doing things this way for generations. Or lack of imagination: this is their story and they know how it ends already. Or fear: of the authorities, of unrest, of losing the privilege they had of maintaining their own religion. Or fear of losing their own power. Or a genuine desire to do the best they could by their people – but an inability to see that God could do that better than them, and in ways they couldn't have imagined.

The chief priests were real people, with real motivations, getting it really wrong but not necessarily through real evil. If we forget that about them, we're in danger of forgetting that we can do that too. We too can be motivated by all sorts of things – not evil, not even necessarily bad, but things that prevent us from seeing the new things God is doing. New things in places outside those that are familiar to us; new things inside those places, with people we wouldn't expect to be revealing God. New things that don't depend on us; new things that break the stories we live within; but new things into which we're invited to step.

In my version of the Gospel story, at least one of the chief priests left his encounter with Jesus shaken and wondering whether he'd been wrong about John the Baptist, and whether he'd been wrong about

Jesus. I don't know if that's true – if that encounter with Jesus made that kind of difference to that person on that occasion – but I know it's possible. Because it's possible for all of us. When we encounter Jesus, Jesus **will** show us the new things he's doing. Jesus will shake us, if we let him. He will make us wonder, if we let him. And – if we let him – he will invite us to leave behind the old stories about our responsibilities, our fear, and our pride, and join in with something new.