

ST. AIDAN'S AND WESLEY UNITING CHURCHES, CANBERRA

SUNDAY, 25TH. SEPTEMBER 2011, 9.00AM and 10.30AM

SERMON

JAMES HAIRE

READINGS: Exodus 17: 1 - 7

Philippians 2: 1 - 13

Matthew 21: 23 - 32

TEXT: Matthew 21: 23 – 32

If someone asks you a question, they are not always entitled to an answer. Patrick Murdoch knew this principle. Some of you may have heard of his grandson, Rupert. His father, Keith, was a journalist. His grandfather, Patrick, was a Presbyterian minister. In 1909, Patrick Murdoch was a witness in a libel action. The defence lawyer asked him to produce a letter. He replied 'No.' When pressed, he said the document was the property of the Presbytery. The judge asked him twice to produce the letter or he would 'send for a policeman'. Patrick replied: 'Very well'. The judge then looked him squarely in the face and said: 'You produce the letter or I will send you to jail'. Patrick said, very quietly: 'Very well, sir, I will go to jail'. Patrick Murdoch was imprisoned. Sensational news reports followed. His Presbyterian supporters argued he was suffering for his conscience. Eventually, the Presbytery presented the documents to the negotiating parties. Patrick was released. He had not sacrificed his principle. He had maintained allegiance to Christ alone. He argued that if the State did not recognise the first loyalty of Christians to Christ, then Australia could not have a free church within a free state.

As outlined in our reading for today, they had not only been silent in the face of authority. They had been prepared to challenge the powers of this world, in allegiance to Christ. The background for our reading for today is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as Messiah. He had been greeted with noisy hosannas. He had cleared out the Temple, and he had put himself in its place.

A young upstart from Galilee, a country village, now Jesus was entering the Temple for the last time. He did so as King, Messiah and Lord, and he did so to a large crowd gathered all around. This was the beginning of end. The chief priests and elders were looking get Jesus on a charge of blasphemy. The Pharisees were also present. They asked him by what right was he doing these things. Who had given him this right? 'These things' could have meant his royal entry. They could have meant his cleansing of the Temple. But they could also have meant his entire ministry.

In chapter 11 we read Jesus say that: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father'. The preceding chapters show that he had taught with authority. He had healed the paralytic. He had empowered the disciples. Ultimately he would die and rise again. In the style sometimes used by a Jewish rabbi, Jesus refuses to answer the question. He comes back with another question: 'I'll

ask you a question', he says, and if you can answer it, then I'll answer yours. Where did John's baptism come from? Was it from heaven (meaning God) or from this world?'

The chief priests talked amongst themselves for a while. Then they realised that whatever response they gave would reflect badly on them. If, on the one hand, they said that John the Baptist was from God, then that meant that they should have taken his message seriously before now. If, on the other hand, they said John the Baptist was from the world, then they had to manage the crowd's reaction to them. Many in the crowd believed the message of John the Baptist.

The attitude of the crowd to John the Baptist was not an idle threat. The ancient historian Josephus argued that John the Baptist had created such a strong following that Herod had 'become alarmed'. John was so eloquent that the people would follow anything he said. Herod feared the people would revolt. So the Jewish leaders avoided the question. They replied: 'we don't know'. In so doing, they fall on their swords. Jesus was vindicated: 'Well then, neither will I tell you by what right I am doing these things'. Jesus was off the hook, for the moment at least, but the drama was building. What could have turned into a legal investigation or an arrest had turned into a high-profile public debate in front of the crowds.

Jesus may seem to have evaded the question. But with his counter-question he gives us a clue as to his identity. The reader of Matthew knows that Jesus' baptism in Chapter 3 is the first time we are told that Jesus is the Messiah. When 'he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."' (3:16-17). So some did what John the Baptist said, even though they looked like traitors to Judaism, and some refused to believe John the Baptist, even though they were God's chosen people.

They were like two sons. The parable of the two sons is found only in Matthew's gospel. It is similar to the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The sons are probably adolescent boys. When the father asked the sons to work in the vineyard, one said 'no' and then did what he was told. The other said 'yes', then refused to work.

But Jesus isn't content with this. He drives it home further. By asking which son did the right thing Jesus forces the Jewish leaders into a comparison between themselves and tax collectors and prostitutes. The one who says no he doesn't feel like working is like a tax collector or a prostitute. Tax-gatherers and prostitutes stood at the very base of Jewish society. Tax-collector not only worked for the occupying power, they also had incredible opportunities for corruption against their own people. Prostitutes too serviced the needs of the occupying Roman military and civil authorities. Both occupations were at heart anti-patriotic, especially among Jewish zealots. Their daily life seemed to be one big 'no' to God. However, for Jesus, it is the grace of God which brings them, in their humility and brokenness, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven first.

The one who says 'yes', but never gets around to it, is like the religious leaders in the Temple. The son who says 'yes' says: 'Behold, I am here, sir'. It is as if he were to say: 'Your wish is my command'. So the lives of the Jewish leaders look like one big 'yes' to God. They are praying, teaching, organising alms, but in reality they are just keeping up appearances. They did not believe John's message about the Messiah, and did not repent. However, here is no brokenness, no need. Grace does not find a place, and so they do not enter the Kingdom first, if at all.

Let us look at our situation of Christian existence today.

One of the great challenges of our time is that of our globalising societies. Our dominant Western culture faces an enormous challenge. Throughout the Western world our culture is going through a period of immense insecurity. In fact, it seems to me, our culture is in the middle of great self-doubt. Western culture has brought great good to many parts of the world. Those positive goods have included democracy and equality, and the alleviation of poverty for millions of people through the activities of commerce and the stock markets. These two factors in the past have brought millions of people in Western societies out of poverty and hopelessness and into wellbeing. However, now there is great self-doubt about both. There is doubt about the effectiveness and integrity of democracy. In Western societies is it often corrupted by the power of money and the intransigence of the bureaucracy? Again, there is doubt about the validity of the stock market. Is it too unstable? Can it provide stable prosperity? What is the relationship of the market to the state? The effect of these questions has been to create insecurity in Western culture, with its close associations with Christianity. There have been two reactions to this insecurity. First, there has been growth of a self-loathing of Western culture by many within that culture, particularly among certain intellectuals. This has manifested itself in an excessive love of other traditions and ambivalence about one's own tradition. Second, and more dangerous, has been a violent defence of Western culture and an unthinking attack on other cultures. Both of these reactions are dangerous.

We need a completely different perspective. That perspective needs to be based on a sober reflection on one's own culture. In this case it requires a sober reflection on Western culture. Western culture has provided great good to humanity, both in terms of the development of democracies and equality before the law and in terms of the alleviation of poverty and the creation of opportunity for millions. That is fundamentally why people from other cultures seek to live in Western societies. Western culture has of course many faults, but the factors above are worth developing and nourishing. Equally, other cultures have great values, particularly the emphasis on the centrality of the community, and mutual care within the community. There is no place for self-loathing of, or violent defence of, Western culture *per se*.

In our Christian existence today, we are like the tax-collectors and prostitutes, totally dependent upon the grace and love of God in Christ. We live in this culture. There is no need to loathe it or to aggressively defend it. We live by grace. The tradition of the funerals of the Royal House of the Hapsburgs, of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the last of whom, Otto, died recently) is that at the Cathedral in Vienna the door is slammed in the face of the cortege until the Royal Chamberlain ceases to recite the list of royal titles, and confesses: 'Here comes (for example, Otto), a sinner, seeking God's mercy in Christian burial'. We live and die by grace. There is no better place to be!

May God grant us courage do spread the word of God's grace in Jesus as we go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ, the one true Head of the Church and of each of our lives.

Amen.