

Sermon, 28 September 2008—Proper 21

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4,12-6; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

From now until the end of the Liturgical Year, we will be listening to stories of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. The one we heard today is the first of his controversies with the Temple authorities.

Remember what led up to this: Jesus, according to Matthew, has already entered Jerusalem to riotous acclaim amid palms and Psalms, gone straight to the Temple, and immediately disrupted the arrangements made there to ensure that Gentile pagan currency and blemished animals were barred from the Temple precincts. The tables of the money-changers were there to ensure that no Temple transaction would take place with the coins of idolaters. The stalls were there to ensure that no Temple sacrifice would be of an animal that had not already been inspected and approved as worthy of God. Once Jesus had cleared the court, he settled in to teach in the space he had made—much as he does with us: the cleansing is not for itself alone, but so that an opening can be held distended and ready for the Word of God. Jesus returned to the Temple to teach day after day until his arrest.

At this point, the priests and elders ask an obvious question: who gave you the authority to do this? As so often happens with Scripture, these words have total initial legitimacy, and Jesus scrapes that surface off to show what lurks beneath. Every Gospel has examples of Jesus' disconcerting power to pick out the posture under the pose, and once the contradiction is known, to let the persons exposed determine if they are willing or not to change. We recognize immediately the situation we heard today; the priests and elders mean to have it understood that they are the ones with authority to decide what is authorized—and they have not authorized this. We also

recognize that under the pose of those who issue licenses and permits and who merely wish to inspect Jesus' documents, they are crouched in the posture of wrestlers whose grip on their power is pugnacious and relentless. Their interest in Jesus is neither casual nor official, but professional and personal—one gorilla has seen another enter the clearing; they both know there is only room for one, and both start roaring. And of course the story is remembered because, beneath everything else, we find the beams and girders and foundational structure of human resistance to God.

We, over and over, make the same demand of God: by what authority do you meddle here? We know the answer and we don't like it, so we ask the same question over and over, hoping we can wear God down into giving us a different answer. God, however, deals in facts, not opinions, and can't give us much help in living out fantasies. At worst, God goes silent; that's what anyone does when confronted with an irrational challenge. At best, God, over and over, asks us how *we* would recognize authority. God is not the Church, not even our mother. God does not say, "because I told you so, because I'm older, because I know better, because this is how we do it here, and if you want to eat this supper, you will put that napkin in your lap and take your elbows off the table." God does not even say, "because I am trying to look after you, and what I am asking you to do will keep you healthy and happy." No, God does what Jesus does. God, in those subtle indirect ways God has, calls our attention to some activity in which ongoing spiritual power is evident, and asks, "What do you think is going on there? Where does that power come from? What authority is this based on?"

We realize we're caught. If we want to admit that spiritual power is palpable, if we want a share in it, we must admit that something is going on.

Now, we could, even after feeling its joy and clarity, deny that there is any such thing as spiritual power. Many do. By the way, this is moving close to what Jesus calls the “sin against the Holy Spirit,” the one sin that cannot be forgiven. It is a particular sin in which, after becoming aware of something good, we deny that any good is taking place, or, if we at least admit that it is happening, we deny that it is coming from a source of good that intends good and that can bring about more good. It is the sin against the Holy Spirit, because we deny good has an active source; it is unforgivable, not because God is unwilling to forgive it, but because in it we turn our back on the source of forgiveness and deny that it exists.

However, if we admit that some spiritual power is at work, Jesus’ question is crucial and urgent. Is this transformation coming from the person who has been changed or from some source beyond the person? Is there some power greater than that person involved or not?

The priests and elders are caught. Notice how they try to think this through. They believe that if they say the source is human, then everyone caught up in the transformation will look at them in disbelief and disagree. Those being changed know that this energy and hope is rarely around; they know that when it is manifest, wondrous things happen. If this were a simple matter of human beings operating on their own, why is it so obvious to all involved that this is a NEW thing, unavailable until this point, making connections between us and giving us common purpose? So that is one fork in the road. The other fork the priests and elders see is this. They believe that if they say the source of power is divine, then Jesus and everyone will ask, “If you believe that, then why do you resist it; why do you avoid it?—particularly since God and spiritual power is what you are all about.”

So the priests and elders stubbornly choose to remain safe—or what appears to them safe—and they say, “we don’t know.” And they get what God always delivers to those who choose “we don’t know” as their answer to spiritual challenges: they get the silence of God. Jesus gives them their own back to them. Jesus consents to join them were they have positioned themselves, and he says, “Then I won’t say anything either.” It is the only answer God can ever give to those who *choose* not to know.

Now there is a holy ignorance which is a reflection of our human fallibility and limitation. That “unknowing” is something our Wednesday evening discussions are exploring. That darkness, though, arises on the other side of intentional and concentrated effort, where our attention has been held steady, and our intellect has examined every option, and our life of active good work has been sustained faithfully. Moments come when we realize we have reached a boundary. We find ourselves distressed because we want a fuller deeper commitment. We are ready for it, but we cannot see the next step for the darkness. That is the moment of the emptying out that Paul describes: we no longer grasp for equality in our former state, but take on the form of a slave and obey what is wandering and searching with such integrity within us. This painful yearning ignorance is far different from the official safe statement of the priests and elders. Some people cannot take another step because they’ve collapsed on the slopes of Everest; others, because they’ve zoned out on the couch.

It is not so simple, though. Whether we know it or not, we are already treading the foothills, and to prefer not to know where we are, and to insist to others that we do not know, is spiritual cowardice and laziness.

However, there is more to it than that.

The Christian vision, the Christian proclamation, is that these dichotomies of human and divine are resolved in Jesus. The priests and elders stand on the threshold of what is impossible to comprehend. There is no competition in the work of God between what is human and what is divine, and the new thing about it is that it is ONE activity.

Over and over, we human beings try to settle for only one fork in the road. Many of us shrink back, like the priests and elders, in order to remain safe and non-committed, from making any choice at all. But the deepest truth is that this choice doesn't face you at all. Jesus' question is like a Zen koan, one of those puzzle questions whose impossibility of answering forces the mind to break down and break through. The true answer, the answer that frees you, is "all of the above."

The right answer—the answer impossible for the priests and elders in the Temple—is that John's authority came from *both* human and divine sources. Now the truth is that they do not want to concede anything to John or to Jesus, so they betray themselves and surrender their spiritual growth and maturity by claiming ignorance. But John's power was *both* a human power of persuasion *and* a divine power of conviction. Once the priests and elders frame their answer as either/or, even if they wanted to reply to Jesus honestly, they cannot get to the truth from where they are starting out.

None of us are asked to choose either the human or the divine location of holy activity—yet over and over Christians have tried to have the person of Christ, the nature of the Church, this bread and this wine, and even the wonder of our own life, be only one thing. If it is only one thing, we can understand it, manage it, control it. If it is only one thing, we do not need to surrender to it, because we have a category for it.

However, none of these mysteries are one thing. Christ is at the same time fully human and fully divine: that is his power. The Church is at the same time a human institution and the mystical Body of Christ, the Communion of Saints. The bread and wine are at the same time a morsel and a sip and also the renewed grace-filled presence of Christ among us. And you are at the same time an evolved member of a natural species, highly social, terribly fragile, and also child of God and heir of the cosmos. The Church exists to insist that more than you think is going on is actually going on. It is the particular genius of Anglicanism to insist that God does not act in either/or categories, but in both/and categories.

That is the fruit of these lessons for us today. What we have at St. John's is more than meets the eye. Yes, you have friends here, but you have fellow saints whose spiritual life runs far and wide beneath the surface. Yes, we remember each other in prayer, but a Spirit of unity is waiting to be recognized in our gatherings, so that our prayers become in truth one prayer. Yes, we bake little loaves of bread for our altar, but more than bread is offered back to us: grace and forgiveness and strength and participation in the life of God and insight—if we can see it—that in this morsel, what we cannot imagine being one thing is in fact one thing, and the dualistic alienation of the world, its obsession with either/or, with taking sides, with winning and losing, is proclaimed to be healed and annealed and made one by the gift of Christ, God-with-us.

Pig Roast, you see, and invitations to those neighbors that are actually strangers; evangelism and willingness to be known so that others can know joy; the courage to avoid saying that we do not know the Spirit and do not know power; the insight to claim that God is irrevocably invested in our

lives and has raised us up already as members of the Body of Christ, the boldness to claim that God is here, here in the people and also here in the bread we eat and the wine we drink—water from the rock—until the day all our hesitation, even our spiritual cowardice and our preferences for answers that divide the truth, is taken from us, and the darkness turns to light, and we enter the life exchanged without reservation within the Holy Trinity, the one God, whom we praise today and hope to praise forever.