

Jeff's reflection – September 27, 2020

Today's scripture reading shows how you should not greet visitors to your place of worship.

The reading begins with Jesus entering the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus has been walking from village to village, saying that the poor, the meek, the grieving, the peacemakers, those with a soul hungering for right relations – that these are the people who are blessed. He has taught creative non-violent responses to Roman oppression – turn the other cheek, carry a soldier's pack an extra mile. He has taught his companions a prayer beginning with the words, 'Our Father in heaven.' He has healed people of leprosy. He has healed people incapable of movement. He has fed the hungry thousands. He has told stories that people are discussing and debating long after first hearing them.

Jesus has been doing these things and more; and when he enters the temple he is met with what sounds like accusatory questions. The temple 'professionals' – the chief priests and religious leaders, ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

In other words, 'Who is the author of the words you speak, of the stories you tell, of the story you are living?'

It's not exactly a hospitable or even polite welcoming committee, so Jesus answers a question with a question. He asks them, "When John the Baptizer baptized people, was that just his idea or was it God's idea?"

The religious leaders realize that this is a trap. If they say that it was God's idea, then Jesus will ask why they didn't support John. If they say it was all John's own idea, then anyone who had been baptized by John – and they had no idea who around them might be a John disciple – could turn on them. Heads I win; tails you lose – they refuse to answer.

So Jesus doesn't give an answer to their questions, but instead, he tells a story – a story about a father who asked his sons to go work in the vineyard. The first son says he will, but then doesn't. The second son says he won't, but then does. It is one of those odd Jesus stories that has no particular moral, but does remind us that things are not always as they seem, or that people are not always what they say!

All of which brings Jesus back to John the Baptizer. He says that tax collectors and prostitutes believed John and so they are entering the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders do.

Does that mean that Jesus thought that the tax collectors and prostitutes were more 'religious' than the temple leaders, or that they were nicer people, good people, saintly people? I'm not sure that's the point.

Why did people walk into the wilderness to listen to John, to be baptized by John? More specifically, to be baptized in the Jordan River, in the river that more than 900 years previously, a group of slaves from Egypt had crossed to leave slavery behind and begin a new society grounded in God's promises that the land could provide for everyone, so long as the land and each person were treated with reverence and compassion.

The people went to hear John because he said that they needed to Repent – to re-imagine the world. They went to hear John because they knew that the promised land no longer held promise for the poor, and the physically or emotionally challenged, or the foreigner. They went to hear John because John knew that the system wasn't working, that a land of a few rich and a vast number of poor was not God's promised land. They went to hear John because John knew that a new way of being God's people in God's land was not only needed – but that a new way was God's way. John knew that God was authoring a new story.

We have to repent – change – reimagine our world – lots of people today would say that John's words are as relevant in year 2020 as they were in year 29.

We need a reimagined world – a world of food shared, of financial wealth shared, of housing shared; a world in which the sacredness of creation is honoured; a world in which justice means 'not just us', not just the privileged' a world in which black lives matter; in which indigenous lives and spirituality matter; a world in which compassion is the new normal; a world in which people live the ongoing story of love, reconciling justice and hope – the ongoing story being authored by God. A world in which we humans reimagine ourselves as being created in the image of God, as living the story of God's love.

A world re-imagined as truly being God's world.

AMEN