

Holy Week Reflections - Tuesday

Matthew 21: 23-27:

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Reflection

Rev. Dr John Morgan-Guy is a retired priest who encouraged me in my vocation. I remember him mentioning the Dowager Countess of Buckingham in a sermon – who sounds a bit like Downton Abbey's Lady Grantham, without the heart. In 1739, she refused to hear George Whitfield (a famous preacher at the time) preach, writing to a friend:

'I thank your Ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preachers. Their doctrines are most repulsive, strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and do away with all distinction. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth... so much at variance with high rank and good breeding'.

In other words, offence was caused by a similar idea presented by Jesus to the chief priests and elders: God has no favourites. By challenging Jesus on whether it is appropriate for him to say the things he does; the response leaves them are caught by their own consciences, by the slippery thing called power, and by trying to be too clever by half.

Sam Wells writes that: *'God always intended Jesus to come among us. Not to fix a problem, but to embody God's love. Crucifixion, in Jesus' time, for what Jesus was saying – and to whom – was a very real risk...that's how God exposes the emptiness of power. For power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes'.*

For Jesus, a superior intellect or outward trappings of success does not give the right to treat others with condescension. It is a trap any person with perceived authority faces if they lose sight of the responsibility their position carries. Even on a day-to-day level we all fall into this way of thinking due to competing pressures on our time, headspace or patience. We might anticipate a certain response from a colleague, friend, partner, when if we just paused to be in the moment and have a conversation, we would find a different outcome.

A lot of the time, it comes from the same place as the chief priests and elders. In our rushed and busy lives, our need to be validated and have a status. So much of our best learning is in the experience rather than the internal strategies.

Lord, I pray that this Easter I might be drawn a little further outside my comfort zone to engage in some small way with a struggle for justice and integrity. I pray that the barriers we encounter in ourselves and in our communities might be overcome by a renewed closeness to Christ. Amen.

Action:

Pick up the phone and have a conversation with someone with no agenda than to just see how they are. Try and pick someone who will be surprised by the phone call!