

Prelude Part of “Prelude in F” by Stanford, played by John Crombie

Words of welcome As we come into the presence of God, we still our hearts and minds, remembering the holiness of the One whom we are privileged to call Father and Lord.

Hymn: Be Still for the presence of the Lord

Prayer

Lord God, as we focus our minds, it is easy for our thoughts to shoot off in so many directions. We find it hard to slow down, to remove all the clutter and concentrate on You, Lord. In the stillness of this place, this time, take from us the strain and stress as we feel ourselves rest in Your eternal love, in the everlasting arms.

Then quietly, the small beginnings of praise well up as we remember what we have in Jesus Christ. That we have one who is with us, who guides and strengthens us. Who holds us through every storm of life, who leads us to everlasting life.

We confess that sometimes the storms we endure are of our own making. A foolish word, a thoughtless comment, a misguided action, a quick judgement. Then we have to live with the consequences, and the guilt. Take all that stress from us too and replace it with Your forgiveness and peace.

Heavenly Father, in Your hands we are safe and secure – we rejoice in Your eternal love and all sufficient grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. So hear us now as we pray in the words he gave us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Reading: Mark 11:27-33 (Mary)

I said last week that we had seen Jesus talk about sex and marriage and then about money, now we come to one of the many times when he talked about politics. These encounters which happened in the lead up to the crucifixion are increasingly hard-hitting. The picture of Jesus that we are given is certainly not of “Gentle Jesus meek and mild.”

The context to the conversation we read about is that this is the day after Jesus had cleansed the temple, driving people and animals from its courts. It was the day after people had let him do this: they had gone when he said, “Go!” They had stopped using the temple courts as a short cut between different parts of the city. Jesus’ carefully planned outburst in the temple had not been the work of a moment or effective only for a moment. He had made a difference that continued – at least into the next day. And the people who usually made the decisions about the temple, the people who would have liked to think that the life of the temple was in their hands (though in fact it was not) did not like to see their place usurped. This is not just a dispute about religion, but about power and politics: the temple was the one part of the political life of the nation which the local people had some kind of control over. You couldn’t do much about Caesar or Herod, his puppet. You couldn’t do much about Pilate or about the soldiers which were never far from any public gathering. But the temple was Jewish. It belonged to the unique and distinctive Jewish belief in one God.

Yes, but even the temple was political. It had been planned by King David and built by King Solomon and had always been associated with the royal family. Herod’s immediate forefathers had served as both priests and vassal kings. And even the Romans were making

noises about what should and shouldn't happen within the temple worship. So when someone came into the city and ordered things in the temple to change, it wasn't just about doing worship differently. It was about politics and power. And so they came to Jesus to ask him who he thought he was that he was acting in such a way.

And Jesus told them.

I know it looks like he parried the question and refused to answer but look a little deeper and you will see that in fact he did answer, though his questioners might choose not to hear the reply.

He returns question for question. The scribes and elders ask what his authority is, where it comes from. Jesus asks them where John the Baptist got his authority. It is a clever answer-stroke-question, because he knows that they will find it hard to answer in a public space. They might like to think that John was just a jumped up nobody, whose flame had burned and then gone out, and good riddance, but the people who might overhear were more trusting and admiring of John. And John had been more than a nine days' wonder. Although he was now dead, he still cast a significant shadow. So on one level it was clever to reply to a question with one like this, which was hard to answer.

But then, think back to John's ministry. Think back to John and Jesus. Think back to Jesus' baptism, and the Spirit coming on him like a dove and the voice from heaven saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Where *did* Jesus get his authority from? He had given his answer.

He had given his answer and we can learn from him and his answer. We learn, of course, to remember where Jesus' authority came from, that it came from God. And so we are reminded that it is he to whom we should listen and who we should obey. But we can also learn from the way that he answers.

Do the scribes and elders really want to know about Jesus' authority? No, they want to tell him that he has no authority. They are not seeking information so much as seeking a way into a conversation which should end with their own authority being acknowledged. And Jesus knows this. Jesus can easily discern between those who come to him genuinely seeking to know what he can teach them, and those who come pretending to seek knowledge but really just wanting to put him down and pick holes in his line of thought. As his disciples, we encounter both kinds of questioners as well.

If people know that you are a follower of Jesus, a Christian, then there will be times when people will genuinely want to know about your faith: what you believe and how it works out in practice in your life and how it helps, and what still puzzles you. And it is a joy to answer the questions of those who really want to know. But there will be others who see you as a threat, or as standing for something that they dislike – an authority that they can't control maybe, or a hint that there is more than just this life in the world. And they will come at you – not to you – with questions designed to trip you or put you down or undermine your faith. Watching Jesus we can learn how to deal with such people: not laying out our deepest and most personal faith in words of one syllable for them to pick apart, but meeting question with question – why do you want to know? What do you think about that issue? – until the conversation withers or moves into a real meeting of minds.

Or you could do what Jesus does in fact do next: he carries the fight to his enemies, by means of a story.

Reading: Mark 12:1-12 (Mary Ellen)

Hymn: Meekness and majesty

Jesus tells a story about a vineyard and its tenants. It is a good vineyard, not just a huddle of vine plants: it has a fence around it to keep unwanted intruders out; it has a wine-press, so that the wine can be made on site; it has a watchtower to aid those who will watch out for thieves and vandals. It is then leased to tenants and the owner leaves them to it. And they do quite well. They grow the grapes and make the wine and sell it: but they are not so keen on paying their rent, giving the owner his arranged cut of the profits. And when the owner sends to get what is his, his servants are refused and abused and insulted – and they are not given what is the owner's due.

No one listening to this parable would be scratching their heads about what it could mean, least of all the scribes and elders. It was the pride of Israel to be known as God's vineyard. Isaiah the prophet sang a song about Israel as God's vineyard, though in that song the relationship between vineyard and owner did not end well: and the vineyard is left to become a wasteland, overgrown with briars and thorns. Jesus' story is similar but different. But as the people listened they would realise that it is going to have a different end. Servants are ignored and abused and killed, and then the son is sent. The tenants know who he is, and they think that if they kill him, there will be no one to stop them seizing the vineyard for themselves.

Everyone knows that Jesus is talking about Israel and its leaders. They may not realise that he is also talking about himself. They may not have known that he is talking about how he – and the death that he knows is coming to him – is about to become the founding stone of a new building, of a new vineyard wall, maybe. But they do know that he is promising that God will remove his chosen people from his special care and take from them the inheritance he has loaned to them.

And why? Because they wanted to be their own bosses: they thought that their own authority was greater than God's. This parable is still talking about authority and where it comes from.

And it is not only talking about the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day – although of course it was addressed to them in the first instance. Jesus knows well enough that one of the temptations that comes invidiously to those who are loaned responsibility by God is to take that power and authority as their right and forget where it comes from, who is behind it, and what their responsibilities are. This can be true of politicians – I know, we have an election this week! – if they begin to think that whatever power or authority they have is theirs by right, to use as they see fit.

It can also be true of church leaders, who can explain away to themselves some very dubious uses of power. It can be true of churches as well. There can be a feeling especially among long-established denominations and congregations – like ours – that our church has the right to exist. To all of us this parable comes as a warning: God expects us to live his way, use what he has loaned us well and wisely, and to acknowledge our dependence on God who loves us. If we get too big for our boots, then God is always able to start again, with other people called to follow his Son.

In a time of transition – and we are living through one of the greatest times of transition that society and the church have known for many long years – it is good to remember this parable. Not so that we can run away scared, but so that we can take the time to remember whose we are, and whom we serve and ask him again how in changing circumstances he wants us to tend his vineyard. Maybe he wants a new variety planted this year – maybe he has new groups within our community that he would like us to find ways to reach out to. Maybe he wants us to improve the soil this year – to spend time as a church community digging deep into God's word and allowing it to change our lives. Maybe we are called to prune, which is painful, or to harvest. As disciples of Jesus, seeking to live in his

way, may we never forget that behind and around and above and beneath all that we do and are, is God, and he has plans for us.

Hymn: Christ be beside me

Prayer

Lord God, you are the Lord of all. You are the Lord of the world and of everything in it, and you are the Lord of us, your people. So often we run to you with the word “lord” on our lips, as though it were your name. As we pause in prayer, remind us of what it means that we call you our Lord: that you are the one who is in charge.

As Lord, we bring to you the concerns of our hearts, knowing that everything and everyone falls under your loving care, and that we can trust you to hold us and our concerns in the hollow of your hand. So we pause and bring to you the people about whom we have thought most in this past week, whether they are family, friends, neighbours, or strangers.... Bless them, and make them a blessing.

We pause and we bring to you the difficult and tragic circumstances we have heard about this week – large, international matters, such as the Covid surge in India, the suffering of the people of Brazil – and less well-publicised matters which nevertheless have come to our attention....

Bring in your kingdom of peace and justice.

We pause and we think about our country as we vote in an election this week. We pray that as people vote all kinds of ways for all kinds of reasons, those who are appointed would serve with integrity and humility, seeking always to remember that your tender care is for the lowest and least....

Give grace to our life together.

We pause and we bring to you our desire to be good servant of yours: showing and sharing your love, bringing a blessing to your name, not ours. Thinking back and looking ahead, show us the ways, small or large, that we may do this and give us grace to serve you in your way.....

To your name be glory, Lord God.

We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Hymn: The Church is wherever God’s people are praising

Benediction

As good workers in God’s fields, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

And the blessing of God almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

be with you and rest upon you now and always. Amen.

Postlude: Part of Bach’s Trio Sonata in Eb, played on the St. Bride’s organ by Alan Buchan