

The Question about John Matthew 21:23-32

When the police finally caught up with the man, they took him off to a police station and sat him down. They let him get his breath back, and then the questions began. 'What were you doing in that street at that time of night? What right did you have to be in that house? Where had you come from? Who did you see? Why were you so worried when we came to find you? But of course the question they really wanted to ask was: 'did you commit the murder?'

They couldn't ask it yet, because they didn't want to say the words too soon. If the suspect wasn't the murderer, but knew something about it, this might give the game away. If he was the murderer, a direct question would certainly make him say 'No' and then everything else would be useless. They needed to come with a barrage of questions to get him talking, to get him either telling the truth or twisting around so many lies that they'd catch him out sooner or later. Then the truth would come out.

The question the chief priests and the elders of the people really wanted to ask J was 'So do you think you're the Messiah?' All the other questions they ask him, in this chapter and the next one and all J's answers, are whirling around this central issue. Why? The answer is this: it was the Messiah who would have authority over the Temple. J, let's face it, had walked in and had behaved as though he owned the place. Here he was, a country boy from Galilee, coming to the big, smart capital city. He walked into its holiest shrine, which had been ruled for centuries by the chief priests. And, for a moment, he took it over. Who did he think he was?

The only person who might conceivably have a greater authority in the Temple than the high priest was God's anointed king, the Messiah - if and when he showed up. Nobody knew when that would

be. Other would-be messiahs had come and gone. Now here was J behaving as though he had the right to do what only the Messiah could do. So, naturally, they ask him: by what right are you doing all this? And who gave you this right? J's reply is a master stroke. It both is and isn't a straight answer. It certainly isn't just a trick, designed to get them muddled or embarrassed, though it succeeded in doing that as well. Imagine the crowd all around, watching what could turn in to a police investigation or arrest turning instead into a high-pressure and high-profile public debate, with the upstart from the country leaving the sophisticated city folk mumbling that they don't know the answer to his question.

J's question about John the Baptist puts them on the spot; so that whichever answer they give they will be in trouble. But that's not all. The question about John is the clue to the answer J could make, but doesn't yet, to their question. Matthew's reader knows that J has already been anointed by God, with the HS, through John's baptism. That is where he was first declared to be God's beloved son, in other words the Messiah. If the Jewish leaders truly understood what John had been doing, they would know where J got the right to behave as Messiah in the Temple courts.

But J isn't finished. He presses home his advantage. They may not believe that John was a prophet; but supposing he was, what followed? The reality is that some people did what John said, even though they looked like rebels against God; other people refused to do what John said, even though they looked like God's chosen ones. Yes: just like 2 sons, one of whom said 'No' to his father but then did what had been asked, the other of whom said 'Yes' but then didn't do it.

Just in case they don't get the point, J rubs it in. The 1st son, who rudely tells his father he doesn't feel like working today, but then

does it all, stands for the tax collectors and prostitutes. Their daily life seemed to be saying 'No' to God; but when they heard John they changed their mind and their lifestyle. In other words they repented. The 2nd son, who politely tells his father he will indeed go to work, but then doesn't, stands for the Temple hierarchy and other leaders. They look as though they're doing God's will, worshipping in the Temple and keeping up appearances; but they refused to believe John's message, not only about repentance but also about the Messiah who was standing unknown in their midst. Now the Messiah himself is here to call them to account. Not surprisingly, they don't like it.

The challenge of the passage for us today is partly this: to make sure that we are responding to J, allowing him to confront us at any point where we have been like the 2nd son and said 'Yes' to God while in fact going off in the other direction. That's important, but it's not the only important thing. What we should also be asking ourselves is this. What should J's followers be doing today that would challenge the powers of the present world with the news that he is indeed its rightful Lord? What should we be doing that will make people ask, 'By what right are you doing that?', to which the proper answer would be to tell, not riddles about John the Baptist, but stories about J himself.

Therefore, are there any areas of your life where you are behaving like the 2nd son? Have you said 'Yes' to J but then disobey him? Also, how is the way that you are living out your faith challenging those around you? In what ways are you living so differently that those around you ask, 'Why do you live like that?'