



# “How do we know when something is right?”

A service sheet to guide reflections on and around Sunday  
27<sup>th</sup> September 2020

## Introduction

Welcome to worship as we continue learning from St Matthew’s gospel. This week we will be thinking about where we see God at work and know what is right.

## Our call to worship:

The chorus of the song ***One shall tell another*** gives us an invitation central to our theme this week:

*Come on in and taste the new wine,  
the wine of the Kingdom, the wine of the kingdom of God,  
there is healing and forgiveness,  
the wine of the kingdom, the wine of the kingdom of God.*

Graham Kendrick 1981

## Hymn: I danced in the morning (*Singing the Faith 427*)

There is a reminder in this hymn of the opposition Jesus faced from the religious leaders that we will hear about in our Bible reading today.

- 1 I danced in the morning  
when the world was begun,  
and I danced in the moon  
and the stars and the sun ;  
and I came down from heaven  
and I danced on the earth,  
at Bethlehem I had my birth.  
  
*'Dance, then, wherever you may be,  
I am the Lord of the Dance.'* said he,  
*'and I'll lead you all wherever you may  
be, and I'll lead you all in the Dance,'  
said he.*
- 2 I danced for the scribe  
and the pharisee,  
but they would not dance  
and they wouldn't follow me ;  
I danced for the fishermen,  
for James and John ;  
they came with me  
and the Dance went on.
- 3 I danced on the Sabbath  
and I cured the lame :  
the holy people said it was a shame.  
They whipped and they stripped  
and they hung me on high,  
and they left me there  
on a Cross to die.
- 4 I danced on a Friday  
when the sky turned black ;  
it's hard to dance  
with the devil on your back.  
They buried my body  
and they thought I'd gone ;  
but I am the Dance and I still go on.
- 5 They cut me down  
and I leapt up high ;  
I am the life that'll never, never die ;  
I'll live in you if you'll live in me ;  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

*Sydney Carter (1915–2004)*

## Prayer

God who called the world into being, who calls us to follow Christ;  
close our minds to distractions,  
open our ears to hear your call,  
open our hearts to receive your love,  
and open our eyes to the needs of our community.

**Amen.**

## **Bible Reading Matthew 21: 23-32**

<sup>3</sup> Jesus came back to the Temple; and as he taught, the chief priests and the elders came to him and asked, "What right do you have to do these things? Who gave you such right?"

<sup>24</sup> Jesus answered them, "I will ask you just one question, and if you give me an answer, I will tell you what right I have to do these things. <sup>25</sup> Where did John's right to baptize come from: was it from God or from human beings?"

They started to argue among themselves, "What shall we say? If we answer, 'From God,' he will say to us, 'Why, then, did you not believe John?' <sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'From human beings,' we are afraid of what the people might do, because they are all convinced that John was a prophet." <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you, then, by what right I do these things.

<sup>28</sup> "Now, what do you think? There was once a man who had two sons. He went to the older one and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> 'I don't want to,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. 'Yes, sir,' he answered, but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which one of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The older one," they answered.

So Jesus said to them, "I tell you: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

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## **Comment**

How do we know when something is right? At this very moment there is much debate as to whether our government is right to introduce the new measures with regard to coronavirus. Some say they have gone too far, others that they haven't gone far enough. And others ask what right (that is, what authority) does the cabinet have to push through laws not debated in parliament. These are all complex and difficult questions.

In Matthew's gospel chapter 21 there is a lot of debate as to whether what Jesus is doing is right and also what right, what authority, he has to do it. So, this passage can point us to questions which are very relevant for us today: How do we know when something is of God? That is, how do we know if something is "right" or not? And how do we respond?

Just at the minute we might well be asking ourselves "where is God?". The news is full of the rising cases of the coronavirus again. We might well be wondering where God is in this all. It will be important to focus our minds again to see where God is working and to respond.

The Gospels are full of accounts of God at work in Jesus. Those of us with faith look back and see that. However, at the time when Jesus walked the land, it wasn't so clear to everyone. It was particularly unclear to the leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Chapter 21 of St Matthew's gospel starts by recounting how Jesus entered Jerusalem. The people greeted him as a great leader from God - a prophet. This is followed by Jesus going into the Temple and overturning the tables of the unjust money-changers and then healing the blind and the lame. We are told the chief priests and leaders became angry at this. Our passage picks the events up the next day when Jesus is back teaching in the Temple. The authorities question his authority. Perhaps they did so because they felt their own authority was being undermined. Jesus answers them with a question about John the Baptist. Jesus asked them what right did they think John had to baptize? Did his right, his authority come from God or from man?

John the Baptist had been a very popular holy man. The people believed he was a prophet. Yet, the leaders themselves had not followed what John asked of them. Jesus drives this point home with the short parable of the two sons. In this parable a father asks his sons to go immediately to help in his vineyard. The first one refuses, but changes his mind later and goes to help. The second son says 'yes', but does not go. The implication of this parable is that the leaders are like the second son as they have ostensibly said 'yes' to God but then have not followed his directions. Jesus contrasted them with the outsiders, such as the tax collectors and prostitutes who had ostensibly said 'no' to God, but had then responded to John the Baptist and done the right thing. They were like the first son. They had followed the right path.

In this way Jesus points to where God is at work. Jesus said explicitly that John the Baptist had shown them the right path. John, of course, had offered people God's forgiveness and a fresh start as evidenced in their baptism when they repented. And those who were looked down upon, such as the tax collectors and prostitutes, had responded. These people, Jesus said, were going into the Kingdom of God first. They were leading the way. From the accounts in the rest of the gospels we know Jesus had developed the work of John, continuing to offer a fresh start with God, along with justice, forgiveness and healing.

So how do we know when something is right? Chapter 21 of Matthew's gospel suggests we will know when something is right because there will be repentance, justice, healing and forgiveness. That's where we will find God at work. In particular according to our passage we are more likely to find God at work among those society looks down upon and especially those who take an honest look at themselves. Today, for us, that might be the asylum seekers and the benefit fraudsters (small as their numbers are). But it is anyone who is honest to God.

That strikes me as bringing us to a core problem in our passage, for the Temple authorities don't seem to have an honest engagement with Jesus. They are constantly goading him and trying to undermine him, rather than genuinely talking with him. A more honest engagement with Jesus might have been if they had said to him, "You are doing something different and we don't understand it. We feel threatened by it". That might have produced a rather different conversation with a very different outcome. But instead Jesus has to point out to them through the parable that they are not on the right path. Like the younger brother, they say one thing and do another. They are not honest.

So for me there is a call in this passage to a more honest and open engagement with God and with each other. It is a call away from undermining others by jibing questions; a call to admitting need (as the tax collectors and prostitutes have done) and to choosing the way of God. We'll know that path is right because it will be full of honest people who are being changed by following Jesus. On that path there is justice, healing and forgiveness.

Over thirty years ago I saw this path being followed in a Methodist church on a council estate in Leeds; a church often attended by people with various addictions. The people of that church loved their community and loved gathering in their simple multi-purpose hall. There were few pretensions to be anything other than what they were - people seeking to follow Jesus. They welcomed a number of young men who were addicted to glue sniffing and shared tea and buns together after services, along with laughter and good news. When we shared Holy Communion together, there was one woman who would lift her small glass of grape juice and say "cheers". We could see God at work every day. However, the "powers that be" decided to shut the building and sell it to help pay for redevelopment on another more central church. The right thing? Well we could only answer that if we could see whether the "tax collectors and prostitutes" or equivalent were still leading the way there.

Rather than looking back in judgement on that situation, we might look forward in hope to our own. Who is walking "the right path" of faith before us today? Who will we join in with? And with regards to our current national situation, we should do our best to follow whatever guidelines bring healing to our communities, while calling for honesty.

## Questions for reflection

1. What would help me be more openly honest with God and with others right now?
2. Who might "lead the way" for us today in our life with God?
3. How can we help our government to be on the "right path"?

## Prayers for others

Lord God,

We bring to You our leaders, in government, church and local area and in this time of quiet we recall their faces..... We pray they may know what is right and do it.

We bring to You those who teach in schools and nurseries and universities and at home.... We pray they know what is right and teach it.

We pray for those facing difficult decisions, those whose businesses and livelihoods are under threat..... may right be done to share resources and give dignity and worth to all.

We pray for those who are unwell or anxious, naming them in our hearts ..... may a sense of calm and well-being be brought to each and to all.

We pray for ourselves and those we love ..... may we know what is right, honour You and Your ways in our lives, and join with all who repent in new life. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

## Lord's prayer

**Hymn: Lord of creation, to you be all praise! (*Singing the Faith 449: tune Slane/Be thou my vision*).** This hymn honours God with our commitment.

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|---|---|
| 1. Lord of creation, to you be all praise!<br>Most mighty your working, most<br>wondrous your ways!<br>Your glory and might are beyond us to<br>tell,<br>and yet in the heart of the humble you<br>dwell. | not heard<br>is taught by your Spirit and shines from<br>your word.   |
| 2. Lord of all power, I give you my will,<br>in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.<br>Your bondage is freedom; your service is<br>song;<br>and, held in your keeping, my weakness<br>is strong.       | 4. Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;<br>I praise and adore you for all you impart,<br>your love to inspire me, your counsel to<br>guide,<br>your presence to shield me, whatever<br>betide.  |
| 3. Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,<br>rich truth that surpasses my knowledge<br>to find;<br>what eye has not seen and what ear has  | 5. Lord of all being, I give you my all;<br>if I should disown you, I stumble and<br>fall;<br>but, led in your service your word to<br>obey,<br>I'll walk in your freedom to the end of<br>the way. |

Jack Copley Winslow (1882–1974)

## Blessing

The blessing of God, creator, redeemer and friend, be with us all this day and evermore.  
Amen.

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