

### ***The Messiah's Questions! – Matthew 21: 28-32***

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus is berated with all manner of rapid-fire rhetorical questions. The Chief Priests (an opposition party if ever there were one) ask Jesus one question after another. They ask why the disciples don't abide by the tradition of the elders, they ask about divorce, they ask about taxes, they ask about the role of the Ten Commandments, and on and on it goes until even Pilate himself asks Jesus if he is, in fact, the King of the Jews?

In today's passage in particular, the Chief Priests and the elders ask Jesus,

**“By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”**

Then Jesus gives them a touch of their own medicine by asking a few questions of his own.

**“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”**

Scrambling for answers, the Chief Priests and the elders argue amongst themselves. Yet they also knew how to play politics, and so they decide not to answer—not because they didn't *have* an answer, but because they were afraid of how Jesus might respond to their answer.

And so, Jesus asks yet another question,

**“What do you think?”**

He then launches into a parable about two sons. In the parable, when their father asks the sons to work in the vineyard, the first son says he won't help out but winds up doing so in the end. The second says something like, “Sure Dad! I'll get right on that!” But he doesn't follow through in the end.

Jesus then asks another question,

**“which of the two did the will of the Father?”**

They answer, ‘The first.’ We might be tempted to ask why this son chose to help in the end— “Did he have something else to do first?” “Was his schedule full?” “Was he angry with his father or his brother?” But if we're not careful, these questions can bog us down and we can lose the larger, more important point: regardless of what initially

prevented him, the son eventually accepted his father's invitation to go to work in the vineyard.

At its core, this parable is the pattern of our life with God. No matter what we've done, or what may have initially prevented us, God is always extending an invitation to us. We are constantly being drawn into a new place—to new depths of faith, to a new place of divine discovery.

Why? Because life with God is always forward-looking, always calling us out of the confines of our past and present and into something new. In order to live into God's invitation, we must be willing to leave the past behind—no matter how comfortable or familiar or profitable—and turn toward the future, complete with all of its uncomfortable uncertainties and questions and anxieties.

And make no mistake: that's hard!!

Jesus says to the chief priests,

**“Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”**

It's fair to say that Jesus understood the Chief Priests and the elders of Jesus' day had quite a bit invested in the *status quo*. Leaving the past behind for them meant forfeiting their claims to power and position, which had become their entire identity. Stepping into life with God meant leaving all of that behind, in favour of a future they couldn't predict and couldn't control.

But we might ourselves also ask - how about today, now, in our own day?

Today, how willing are any of us to forfeit our positions, our authority, or our privilege? The truth is that, for most of us, the past is pretty enticing—especially when we enjoy privileges we haven't earned.

Back then we learn there are the tax collectors and prostitutes, whose past was marked by derision and servitude; of being treated as things rather than as persons. For them, God's future brought new life!

This is the essential question that every single one of us must faithfully discern: How is God calling us out of our past or present circumstances, into something new?

The truth is, sometimes the answer to that question is unsettling. After all, for as hopeful and encouraging as the future might seem, it's always uncertain. At least we know our past, even if it is limited and dysfunctional.

Yet as people of faith, we are called to hold that tension between the certainty and comfort of our past and the uncertainty and discomfort of God's future. We're called to ask ourselves how our past has been allowed to determine our future, how it has restricted our ability to live faithfully, and to consider where it is that we find life and joy and peace, versus where we find resentment and fear and death.

We're called to ask these questions of our communities of faith, too. How have our churches become entrenched in the structures and boundaries of the past? Or how does doing the same old thing because we've always done it that way, cut us off from new and life-giving possibilities? What parts of our common life together need holding onto or what perhaps, needs letting go?

One final word of caution. When we ask these questions from a place of fear and anxiety, stressed over what our future or our church's future will be—these questions will bear little transformative power. But if we ask them from a place of discernment, prayer and faithfulness, we can be sure that as we move forward to do this hard and holy work, God will be with us on the journey and surrendered to His will, we will find life more abundant!

The Lord be with you.