

Matthew 21:23-32

The religious leaders question Jesus' authority, but Jesus refuses to answer them because they can't answer his question about John's authority. Then he tells them a parable about two sons whose father asks them to work in the vineyard. One says no, but then does, and the other says yes, but doesn't. Jesus explains that like this, religious people are missing out on the kingdom, while outcasts are finding their way in.

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "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.

Who is 'in' and who is 'out' is the essential question of political and economic systems. Who gets to decide how things like debt and immigration and war get decided? On a global scale the question of who gets to share in processes and resources become even more difficult and important. As we face real issues with thirst through contamination of water sources, real issues of hunger, disease, displacement and hatred, the need for greater levels of inclusivity and transparency, and greater participation by ordinary citizens becomes increasingly important. In the Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that God's grace is available to all, and that even those who are least likely to find a place belong, in spite of the attempts of the elite to keep them out. Ultimately, the world and its resources belong to all people. The challenge this week is how to live out of this truth in real and practical ways.

COCU 58A Readings

The Lectionary changes tack a little this week – at least from the perspective of the Gospel. While the Old Testament readings continue to follow the Israelites in the desert (with a similar story to last week's, but focussed on water and thirst, rather than food and hunger), Matthew describes a moment of confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders, in which two questions are raised - where Jesus' authority originates, and who is finding their way into God's Kingdom. The water image becomes a captivating one for this week's worship - because like water that flows into any crack it can find, and that is not easily controlled or contained, God's reign appears in surprising places, and flows into the lives of those that we might prefer to keep out of God's kingdom.

The image of water can be a helpful way into the theme for this week. Although it is only mentioned in the Moses reading in Exodus and in the related Psalm, it is reminiscent of Jesus' words in John that he offers living water. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' response to the question of authority and his parable both indicate that, like the water from the rock, God's living water cannot be contained or controlled. Though the religious leaders would like to be the gatekeepers for God's reign, Jesus indicates that in the very act of doing this, they exclude themselves, while those who would seem to be excluded find their way in. This openness, inclusivity and welcome is characteristic of Jesus and his ministry, as described by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. This ancient hymn which describes Jesus' servanthood and self-sacrifice is Paul's call to treat one another with love and welcome.

Like water that finds the smallest of cracks to flow through, and that bursts out in even the most surprising places (a rock in the wilderness), so God's life - God's living water - flows into any life that has even the smallest crack open to it, and brings life and refreshing and welcome and inclusion.

(John van de Laar, Sacredise)

Exodus 17:1-7

The Israelites complain that they have no water, and Moses takes their complaint to God. God instructs Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with his staff and water flows out for the people to drink.

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Psalms 78:1-4

A teaching psalm reminding God's people of all that God has done, bringing God's people out of Egypt, leading with a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day, and splitting open the rock to give them water to drink.

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.

**We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord,
and his might, and the wonders that he has done.**

In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt,
in the fields of Zoan.

He divided the sea and let them pass through it,
and made the waters stand like a heap.
**In the daytime he led them with a cloud,
and all night long with a fiery light.**
He split rocks open in the wilderness,
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.
**He made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.**

Philippians 2:1-13

The apostle encourages the Christians in Philippi to be united and to be like Christ in their humility, service and self-sacrifice, quoting the ancient hymn of the Church. He reminds them that they are to live out their salvation, trusting God who gives them the will and the power to do it.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.