

Homily – Proper 21A
September 27, 2020
S. Stephen's, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was Voltaire who quipped,

“Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.”

Jesus certainly understood the power and usefulness of a question.

Jesus, that wise rabbi,

the new Moses,

the teacher of Israel par excellence,

knew the ability of a question to advance the dialogue in meaningful ways.

Just a few weeks back, if you recall,

the disciples were grumbling and arguing about who Jesus was –

and instead of just telling them,

he turns the question back to them: “But who do you say that I am?”

When Jesus stands before Pilate being condemned,

he answers Pilate's questions with another question.

Our Gospel reading today is no exception,

and we see on full display Jesus's own mental agility

as he deals with the temple authorities –
those chief priests and religious establishment figures
that he continuously comes into conflict with.

In fact, today's reading takes place
during the events of Holy Week that will lead to his arrest and execution.
Jesus has already foretold his death and resurrection to the disciples
before entering the Holy City on the back of a donkey,
with shouts of Hosanna and palms being waved.

He has driven out the money changers from the Temple,
overturned their tables,
and proceeded to then heal the blind and the lame within the Temple.

So **that** is the backdrop against which they come to him today and ask,
“By what authority are you doing these things,
and who gave you this authority?”

Any of us in their position would probably ask the same thing,
and it's a straightforward enough question – or so it would seem.

Jesus, as usual, is already one step ahead of them,
and so he replies, “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.”

And as you heard,

Jesus asks them a question that they themselves cannot answer,
because they rightly see the trap Jesus has set for them either way.

Because they cannot answer, he will not.

But Jesus is not done with them yet.

He has one more question to pose to them.

As you heard, he tells them a short parable about two sons:

one who initially says he won't do what his father asks,

but changes his mind and ultimately does;

and another son who says he will do what his father asks,

but in the end does not.

Now, given their skill and perceptiveness

in realizing the trap Jesus had them in just a moment before,

I find it somewhat unlikely that they wouldn't see the one being set here.

However, Jesus understood their weak spot,

which was their own readiness to criticize and be certain of correct behavior,

especially concerning something like filial obligations of a son to his father.

So when Jesus asks them which son did the will of his father,
they quickly and rightly answer “The first” – the one who said he wouldn’t,
but ultimately did.

By answering, however, they bring judgement on themselves,
putting themselves right where Jesus wants them as he says,

“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom
of God ahead of you.”

For the tax collectors and the prostitutes recognized John as being sent by God,
but these religious authorities did not;
and even after they had a chance to see John first-hand,
they still would not change their minds.

The same will be true of their treatment of Jesus –
sent by God, but rejected by them –
and, like John, killed, ultimately.

While it is easy to look on this as a wholesale condemnation of a group
or class of people in Matthew’s Gospel –
namely, the temple authorities and priestly caste –
there is something about Jesus’s response that also puts the focus
on each of them as individuals.

Even as he's looking at them gathered together in their group,

we can imagine him looking at each one in the eye,

as if to say,

"I know what your friends are saying and doing,

but you have a choice to make here – for yourself."

"Will you recognize what is happening here?

Will you choose to see the hand of God at work?

Or will you continue to persist in your blindness and hardness of heart?"

In a time and in a culture which placed very little emphasis on the individual,

and instead placed the highest value on the society

or tribal or ethnic national identity,

the emphasis on personal choice and decision stands out as unusual.

However, the Gospels are full of accounts of individual encounters with Jesus –

... individual decisions to follow Jesus.

Perhaps that is what made the Gospels so compelling and memorable

for the earliest Christians –

those earliest followers, who likewise had to make personal decisions

that brought them into conflict with the wider Jewish community,

or even their families, perhaps.

This focus on personal responsibility,
or the decision made by one's own soul
is likewise found in our reading from the prophet Ezekiel this morning.
When the Lord comes to Ezekiel,
he rehearses a common saying in Israel at the time,
“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.”
In other words, the children and other descendants naturally pay the price
for the sins of their forebears.
Sin and punishment – or righteousness and favor –
all are born collectively.
But God says to Ezekiel, essentially – “This doesn't work for me!”
As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.
All lives are mine – the life of the parent as well as the child.
A person's sins are their own and no one else's.
If they turn from my ways and reject my teachings, that is on them;
if you follow me and stay in my paths, you will reap the reward,
but it only benefits you – it doesn't erase someone else's bad behavior.
Again, this focus on the individual choice is remarkable for its time –
(keep in mind Ezekiel is writing 600 years before Jesus's life and death.)
Even though he addresses his questions to the house of Israel,

there is still that implied emphasis on the individual choice –

“Turn, then, and live!”

Reflecting on this same passage from Ezekiel this week, Roman Catholic bishop Robert Barron in his podcast talks about this emphasis on individual decision, and the difference between *actus hominis* and *actus humanus*.

This distinction comes from Aquinas, but essentially there are acts of man, and the acts of a human being.

If I sneeze, or if jump when startled,

when I decide if I want marmalade or jam, eggs scrambled or sunny side up,

that is an *actus hominis* –

the act of a man or a woman – a basic decision that arises out of ordinary activity:

a reflex reaction that is no different from the decision an animal makes.

But when confronted with a serious decision –

one with ethical and moral implications – that is an *actus humanus* –

the act of a human being.

It involves the higher nature of our humanity.

The question posed by Jesus to the temple authorities in our Gospel reading

requires an *actus humanus* – an act of their humanity,

requiring the assent of their minds and souls.

Essentially, Jesus is saying to them,

“You had a choice to make that involved your mind and soul –
and even now, I’m posing it to you again.

The choice you’re making has ethical and moral implications.

So what’s it gonna be?

Meanwhile, while you sit there and decide,

you who are ritually pure and religious professionals,

those whose initial behavior would be considered unclean and unworthy –

tax collectors and prostitutes –

are going in ahead of you.

They’ve seen the work of God for what it is – they’ve sensed it in their very souls,

and they’ve made the personal decision to respond accordingly.

When will you do likewise?”

This is Jesus’s charge to the religious authorities who have cornered him,

but it is also a question posed to us:

a reminder to not be complacent

or feel assured by our status as active church goers.

It is a reminder for self-examination, particularly as we are confronted
with those deeper ethical and moral decisions when they come our way.

Pope John Paul II would remind us that every moral decision we make

is another step in creating the character we are becoming –

another brick in the wall of our humanity.

And so every ethical or moral decision we make, big or small, matters.

Jesus reminds us that the first step is in following him –

he has shown us the Way, the Truth, and the Life,

and so we know already how to make certain decisions;

and by placing our trust in him,

we are given the strength to make the more difficult ones.

I began this morning by saying Jesus understood the power of a question,

so here's one – and I commend this to you for your use in the coming week,

as you pray or walk or whatever it is you do to create space for God:

what is the question you hear God asking you?

What is the question you hear God asking you?

and perhaps more importantly, have you answered it?

Amen.