

Matthew 21:23-32

For any public figure, one of the most challenging things is to maintain integrity...

Throughout Jesus' teaching he challenged hypocrisy, and called people to live lives of integrity, where their actions and words agreed, their heads and their hearts were one.

This is what we see in today's gospel reading.

There are **two incidents** here:

In the **first**, the religious leaders question Jesus' authority to teach, heal and act, as he had just overthrown the tables of the Temple money-lenders and traders..

'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

It is not surprising that they wondered who Jesus was, and how he could do the miracles he did. But they are also jealous of his authority and try to catch Jesus out, to trick him, to discredit him. Jesus is too clever for them and turns their question back upon themselves. He answers their question with his own question, a good Rabbinic technique, well used by politicians! Jesus said, *'I will also ask you one question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?'*

It was the duty of these leaders to distinguish between true and false prophets or teachers. In their hearts they must have known that Jesus could only be acting by God's power, and John pointed people to Jesus, calling them to repentance, to be ready to follow Jesus, but these religious leaders were unwilling to acknowledge this, because it meant **change** for them! Following Jesus always means change, for us as well as them.

They answer, *'We do not know'*. What a lame answer! They knew the truth, but followed the cowardly way of expediency, saying what was safe, rather than what was right and what was true. A temptation that comes to us all.

They were afraid of both the crowds who believed John and followed Jesus; and God, because they knew God was speaking through John and Jesus, but didn't want to admit it. These religious leaders loved having authority and didn't like being challenged.

They ignored God, and those God sent, to protect their own position.

They were hollow men. Their hearts were far from God. They kept up an appearance of being God's people, but their hearts and minds were selfish, ignoring the truth before them. It is a danger for us all, as people of faith. We must beware of letting our hearts drift away from God, leaving only an outward appearance of faith.

Secondly, Jesus goes on to tell a parable, of two sons, directed at these religious leaders. A father asks his two sons to go and work in their vineyard. The first says *'I will not', but later he changed his mind and went'*. The second son said, *'I go, sir', but he did not go'*. Jesus concludes, *'The tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you.. and you did not believe him, but (they) believed him'*. Jesus tells this parable against these religious leaders who claimed to obey God, but ignored God's will in their actions.

These words are a challenge to all of us as Christians, those who profess belief in God and to follow Jesus Christ. **Do our lives match our profession of faith?**

Do we say, 'yes, Lord' we will renounce prejudice, and then look down on those who are different to ourselves?

Do we say, 'Yes, Lord' we will do your will, and then live selfishly for ourselves alone?

Do we say, 'Yes, Lord' we will *'love our neighbour as ourselves'* and then have little compassion or care for others?

It is a challenge to us all.

If we would enter the kingdom of God, this involves letting God change our hearts and minds until they are one, until our words and actions agree.