

Sermon and Readings 27th September 2026 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 17.1-7

^{17.1} 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. ² The people quarreled 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?" ³ 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?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Psalm 78.1-4, 11-16

¹ Give heed to my teaching, O my people:
incline your ears to the words of my mouth;
² For I will open my mouth in a parable:
and expound the mysteries of former times.
³ What we have heard and known:
what our forebears have told us,
⁴ We will not hide from their children,
but declare to a generation yet to come:
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, his mighty and wonderful works.
⁵ He established a law in Jacob and made a decree in Israel:
which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children,
⁶ That future generations might know, and those yet unborn:
that they in turn might teach it to their children;
⁷ So that they might put their confidence in God:
and not forget his works, but keep his commandments,

⁸And not be as their forebears, a stubborn and rebellious generation:
a generation that did not set their heart aright,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

⁹ The children of Ephraim, armed with the bow:
turned back in the day of battle.

¹⁰ They did not keep God's covenant; they refused to walk in his law:
they forgot what he had done, and the wonders he had shown them.

¹¹ For he did marvellous things in the sight of their ancestors:
in the land of Egypt, in the country of Zoan.

¹² He divided the sea and let them pass through:
he made the waters stand up in a heap.

¹³ In the daytime he led them with a cloud:
and all night long with the light of fire.

¹⁴ He cleft rocks in the wilderness:
and gave them drink in abundance as from springs of water.

¹⁵ He brought streams out of the rock:
and caused the waters to flow down like rivers.

¹⁶ But for all this they sinned yet more against him:
and rebelled against the Most High in the desert.

Philippians 2

^{2.1} If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² 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; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Matthew 21.23-32

²³When Jesus 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?' ²⁴Jesus 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. ²⁵Did 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?" ²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷So 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. ²⁸'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." ²⁹He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. ³¹Which 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. ³²For 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.'

Sermon

Have you ever known anyone with authority issues? Perhaps you have worked with someone who simply does not like being told what to do. Perhaps you have raised a child who seems to have been born asking, "Why should I?" Or perhaps, if we are honest, we recognise something of that person in ourselves. Authority is the theme running throughout today's Gospel. The chief priests and elders take issue with Jesus' authority. The two sons challenge their father's authority. And perhaps, in different ways, we all have authority issues. But before we look

at the confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders, the context of this story is really important.

Jesus has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He rides into the city on a donkey, and the crowds welcome him with shouts of: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” There is excitement in the air. Hope is rising. Could this be the one they have been waiting for—the one who will fulfil their hopes and dreams and usher in God's Kingdom? And then Jesus goes straight to the Temple. He overturns the tables of the money changers and drives out those who are buying and selling. Jesus is challenging the religious establishment and reclaiming that sacred space for God. Then the blind and the lame come to him in the Temple, and Jesus heals them.

Shortly afterwards, there is the strange incident of the fig tree, which withers at his word. So, by the time Jesus returns to the Temple, the religious leaders have had enough. They confront him: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” And perhaps we can understand why they ask. Jesus is a threat. The crowds are enthralled by him. He teaches with confidence. He heals people. He challenges established practices. He confronts those who hold power. And the chief priests and elders believe that they are the ones who possess authority. They have the titles. They have the positions. They have the learning. They have tradition behind them. They have the respect of the community. And then along comes Jesus.

So, they want to know: “Who gave you permission?” But Jesus has no intention of entering into an argument about whose authority is greater. Instead, he asks them a question: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” Suddenly these powerful people do not know what to say. If they say John's ministry came from God, Jesus can ask, “Then why didn't you believe him?” But if they say John's ministry was merely human, they risk upsetting the crowd, because the people regarded John as a prophet. So, they give the safest answer: “We do not know.” But their problem is not really that they do not know. Their problem is that they are frightened of what their answer might cost them. They are worried about their reputation. They are

worried about their position. They are worried about the reaction of the crowd. They are concerned about what they might lose. And suddenly Jesus exposes something important about authority.

There is a great difference between having a position of authority and living with godly authority. That is an important challenge for anyone entrusted with leadership—in government, in the community, in our workplaces, in our families and particularly in the Church. Leadership sometimes requires the courage to do what is right even when it is unpopular. It means speaking truth when silence would be easier. It means putting the wellbeing of others ahead of our own reputation. And those of us who exercise leadership within the Church need to hear this Gospel particularly carefully. Because Christian authority is not about titles. It is not about wearing a collar or being called Reverend, Canon, Bishop, Warden or anything else.

The authority Jesus demonstrates is something entirely different. Jesus exercises authority by welcoming sinners. He exercises authority by receiving little children. He exercises authority by touching those whom others will not touch. He exercises authority by restoring those who have been pushed to the margins. He exercises authority by washing feet. And ultimately Jesus exercises his authority by giving himself away. The authority of Jesus leads to the cross. Jesus does not dominate. He serves. He does not humiliate. He restores. He does not use power to protect himself. He gives himself for others. That turns our normal understanding of authority upside down. The world often tells us that authority is about being important, being listened to, having influence and getting our own way.

Jesus says: Authority in the Kingdom of God looks like service. And that raises an important question for us here at Toowoomba West Anglican Parish: What role should our parish play in the life of Toowoomba? We might say that we want to be a strong presence in our community. We want to make a difference. We want to see lives transformed. We want to build God's Kingdom in this place. And those are worthy hopes. But today's Gospel reminds us of what a Christlike presence in our community actually looks like. It will not primarily be measured by our wealth. It will not be measured by how impressive our buildings are.

It will not be measured by our prestige or influence. It will be measured by how we serve. Are the lonely welcomed? Are children valued? Are those who are struggling treated with dignity? Can those who feel pushed to the margins find a home among us? Can people who have made mistakes discover forgiveness here? Can those who are hungry find food? Can those who are hurting find compassion? Can those searching for God encounter the love of Christ among us?

That is what Kingdom authority looks like. But there is another question in this Gospel, and perhaps it is even more personal. Not simply: "Who has authority?" But: "What has authority over me?" Because every one of us lives under some kind of authority. Sometimes it is the authority of other people's opinions. Sometimes it is money or status. Sometimes it is our past. Sometimes fear has authority over us. Sometimes resentment does. Sometimes our need to be right becomes so powerful that we cannot hear another person—and perhaps cannot even hear God.

We may confess Jesus as Lord on Sunday morning, but Monday through Saturday can reveal what really has authority over our lives. And that brings us to the little parable Jesus tells. A father says to his first son: "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." The son answers: "I will not." There is no pretending. No polite religious language. Just a flat refusal. But later he changes and goes. The father approaches the second son with the same request. This son responds beautifully: "I go, sir." He says all the right words. But he does not go. Jesus asks: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The answer seems obvious. The first son. But there is something deeper happening here. Both sons have failed their father. One dishonours his father with his words. The other dishonours him with his actions. Neither son gets everything right. And perhaps that is where we find ourselves in this story. Because none of us gets everything right either. We have all said "No" to God at some point. "No, Lord, I cannot forgive that person." "No, Lord, I don't want to change." "No, Lord, I don't want to serve there." "No, Lord, I don't want to welcome that person." "No, Lord, I am too busy." "No, Lord, I am too old." "No, Lord, someone else can do it."

But here is the wonderful grace hidden within this challenging Gospel: The first son's first answer was not his final answer. He changed. He turned around. He went into the vineyard. And our first "No" does not have to be our final answer to God either. The heart of the Gospel is not that we have always got it right. It is that God gives us the grace to turn around. To change. To begin again. And then Jesus says something that must have shocked his listeners: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." The people whom the religious establishment had written off were responding to God. Those regarded as outsiders were turning towards him. Their past had not disqualified them from God's Kingdom. And neither does ours. That is extraordinarily good news.

Christianity is not a religion for people who have always got everything right. The Church is not supposed to be a gathering of perfect people. We are people who have discovered that, through the grace of God, "No" can become "Yes." Our failures do not have to have the final word. Our mistakes do not put us beyond God's grace. Our past does not have to determine our future. So perhaps the question at the heart of today's Gospel is very simple: What do I care about? What really has authority over my life? Am I most concerned about protecting my comfort, my reputation, my position and getting my own way? Or am I becoming more concerned about the things that matter to God?

Because when what matters to God begins to matter to us, something changes. The lonely matter. The poor matter. The homeless matter. The grieving matter. The person who irritates us matters. The outsider matters. The person whose life is completely different from ours matters. And the person who believes they could never possibly be welcome in church matters. They matter because they matter to God. And that is the sort of parish I believe God calls us to be. Not simply a church that says "Yes, Lord" on Sunday morning, but a church that goes out into the vineyard on Monday. A church whose authority comes not from status but from service. Not from prestige but from compassion. Not from power but from love. A church willing to get its hands dirty in God's vineyard. And perhaps today God is saying again to each one of us: "Go and work in my vineyard." Maybe we have said "No" before. Maybe we have hesitated.

Maybe we think we are too old, too busy, too tired, too wounded or simply not good enough. But our first answer does not have to be our final answer. The invitation remains. The vineyard is still there. And Christ is already at work within it. So today we can turn towards him again and say: "Yes, Lord. I will go." And then, together, we step into God's vineyard and discover what the authority of Jesus really looks like: loving, serving, welcoming, forgiving and giving ourselves for others. Amen.