

Morning Service Sunday 27th September – led by Anne Walton



We might sometimes wonder whether there is a malign influence out there in the cyber-world that infects the computers of our worship leaders, swallowing David Aplin's sermon a few weeks ago, and today disrupting Anne's Reflection, refusing to accept Anne's mouse instructions, and particularly to scroll down to let her access her sermon. In a reflection about authority, her laptop was clearly not accepting hers – well at least not until after a very stern "talking to"!



Anne's reflection was based on the reading from **Matthew 21**, where the Jewish 'powers that be' questioned Jesus' authority to preach, and the sons of a vineyard owner challenged his authority when asked to work in the vineyard.

Anne asked us to take a moment to think about what authority meant to us. The chief priests and elders and the two sons were not the only people with authority issues. The Bible contained many more examples, and so did the modern world.

Yes, Anne was talking about us - and about herself - because we all had authority issues. But perhaps not in the way we usually understood authority. We tended to think of authority as something that came from outside us. From that perspective, the obvious question in the day's Gospel was whether we recognised, accepted and submitted to the authority of Jesus and of his Father, God.

Yet that question was so obvious that Anne wondered whether it really was the question at the heart of the reading. Treating it as the only question might be a misunderstanding of what authority meant. We often associated authority with credentials, expertise, an impressive CV, or years of education. We also assumed that authority was conferred on a person, position, or circumstance: some people had it, while others did not. And, if we were honest, most of us did not like being told what to do. We resisted people teaching us, correcting us, or prescribing exactly how we should act. We could hear that resistance in the chief priests' and elders' challenge to Jesus. We could recognise it whenever someone said: "Who do you think you are?" "What gives you the right to tell me what to do?" "You're not my boss. Go away."

But another issue was there in the reading: our failure - and sometimes our refusal - to recognise, claim, and exercise the authority that was within us. In the language of the reading, it was the authority to go to the vineyard. If we *thought* of God simply as our boss, we misunderstood authority. God *was* not our boss *but was* our authority. Every day, God authorised us and sent us into his vineyard to act in the world with his authority and on his behalf, exercising the many gifts he had graciously given us. Each of us had received at least one gift, and often many. True authority *came* from within, not from other people. It *was* given by God.

That was what the chief priests and elders had failed to understand and also why Jesus was so frustrated with the religious leaders: they exchanged God-given authority for human power. Power and authority were not the same: Power served our own interests; authority, in God's terms, served the interests of others. Many leaders exercised power, but far fewer exercised true authority. People who held genuine authority over us did not dominate or control us. Instead, they inspired faith, hope, and trust. They enlarged our world, opened new possibilities and drew out gifts within us that we might not have known we possessed. They could change our minds and lead us to see things in a new way.

There were people in our church, and in other churches, who had no leadership position, title, or theological credentials, yet possessed great authority, evident in their compassion and gentleness; the way they prayed; their love for others; and the way they showed others the path to God's vineyard. True authority originated in God but was not exclusive to God: God shared his authority with us. And that shared authority was nothing less than the expression of God's divine life in and through our own lives. It was revealed through the varied gifts God had bestowed on each of us.

We might not realise it, but every one of us had God-given authority and gifts. It was not that some had authority and others did not; it was that some recognised and exercised their authority, while others did not—or perhaps could not. Whatever

the reason, God saw the authority he had given us and waited patiently for us to recognise it too. When we did, we might change our minds and go to the vineyard.

So Anne left us with some questions to consider over the coming days: What authority had God given us as individuals? What gifts or divine attributes had God bestowed upon us? Were we living from that authority and sharing those gifts with others? Had we gone to that vineyard?

And I pondered the thought that in recognising authority in someone, we were giving them the freedom to exert that authority over us. So perhaps it was both a 'Power from Outside' and a 'Gift from Within'.