

Sermon delivered by
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18th Sunday after Pentecost
27th September 2026

May the Lord be in our hearts and on my lips, that I may proclaim the Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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

This is the question the chief priests and elders put to Jesus in the Temple. It sounds like a question about credentials, but underneath lies a threat: Who gave you permission to challenge us?

Jesus has entered the centre of religious life, overturned the tables of the money changers, healed the blind and the lame, and begun teaching. Now the people responsible for guarding the Temple want to know who authorised him to do these things.

But Jesus does not answer with a title, a certificate or a chain of command. Instead, he exposes the deeper issue: when authority and truth come into conflict, which one will we protect?

And that is the tension running through today’s Gospel. The chief priests and elders are not only asking Jesus where his authority comes from. Perhaps they are also deciding whether truth is worth the disruption it might cause.

Now, let's go that little bit deeper into the text.

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

At first, this sounds like a theological question. But underneath it's a question about power.

The Temple was far more than a religious building. It carried centuries of memory, identity and hope. It was associated with God's presence among the people.

Yet the Temple also operated under **Roman occupation**. Rome held military power and demanded order.

It was the priestly leaders, though, who were given the responsibility to protect the temple. They also had to deal, however, with an empire that could respond brutally to any perceived threat.

The chief priests were not simply powerful men. They were also people trying to preserve something they deeply valued. Yet they also profited from the system they managed. They had status, influence, authority and power.

And this creates a difficult moral question:

What happens when the system of control you are trying to survive, begins rewarding you for maintaining it?

Before I become too critical of the chief priests, I must ask myself: What would I have done in this type of situation?

If speaking up:

- threatened something I loved,
- if change might cost me security,
- if challenging the system could mean losing my place within it, would I really have been braver?

I don't know...

Now, Jesus' overturning tables of the money changers is not merely anger at commerce in a sacred place. It is a prophetic act at the centre of religious, economic and political life.

And then Matthew's Gospel tells us that the blind and the lame come to him, and Jesus heals them.

Jesus overturns tables—and wounded people come towards him. His disruption and his healing belong together. He does not challenge power simply because he enjoys confrontation. He challenges systems **for the sake of people**.

That gives us an important test for prophetic Christianity. Not simply: How angry are we? But: **Who becomes more fully alive because of what we are doing?**

- Who discovers dignity?
- Who finds a place at the table?
- Who discovers that they matter?

So when the chief priests ask, "By what authority are you doing these things?" perhaps underneath their question is another:

"Who gave you permission to challenge us?"

Jesus has not been appointed by them. Yet people are listening to him.

His authority comes not from controlling people, but from restoring them. His is not power over; it is **power** —

- for healing,
- for liberation,
- for reconciliation and
- bringing people back into community.

Jesus asks them:

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

The chief priests begin calculating. If they say John’s authority came from God, Jesus will ask why they did not listen to him. If they say it was merely human, they fear the crowd, who regarded John as a prophet.

Now notice what they don’t consider. They do not consider:

“What is true?”

They consider:

“Which answer is safest?”

That is what frightened institutions can do. Truth becomes secondary to survival.

This is not only a criticism of ancient religious leaders. It is a temptation for every institution, including the Church. Instead of asking what God is calling us to become, we ask how to preserve membership, reputation, buildings and stability without upsetting anyone.

These questions are not necessarily wrong. Churches do need organisation, buildings do need maintenance and communities need stability. But something dangerous happens when **preserving the institution becomes more important than the reason the institution exists.**

The Church does not exist simply to preserve the Church. We exist to participate in God’s movement of love, justice, reconciliation, healing and liberation. And sometimes those things disturb the peace.

Jesus then tells a story.

A father asks two sons to work in the vineyard. One refuses but later goes; the other agrees but does nothing.

Jesus asks, “Which of the two did the will of his father?”

The answer is obvious: the first.

There is something hopeful about the first son. He gets it wrong, says no and then changes his mind. He has repented.

Repentance is sometimes presented as humiliation: feeling guilty, ashamed and terrible about ourselves as we have sinned.

But in Matthew’s Gospel the understanding is richer. The original Greek word used was *Metanoia*. This word in its original context means: a change of mind, direction, a recognition that we do not have to remain where we are. We can turn around.

That means I do not have to pretend I have always been right. The Church does not have to pretend it has always been right. We can listen, learn and say, “I understand this differently now.”

Then Jesus says something shocking:

“The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Imagine hearing that in the Temple. Jesus points towards those who were regarded as morally compromised and says: **They have recognised something you are missing.**

Throughout Mathews Gospel, people without religious authority understood Jesus:

- women,
- foreigners,
- people with illnesses,
- people labelled sinners and

- people at the edges.

Meanwhile, those closest to religious power sometimes struggled to see what was happening directly in front of them.

What if proximity to religion is not necessarily the same thing as proximity to God?

Perhaps some of the people who have challenged the Church were not enemies of the Church, but prophets.

- Survivors of institutional abuse demanding accountability may be asking the Church to hear a truth it doesn't want to hear.
- Women challenging patriarchal interpretations of Scripture may be inviting the Church to see what it has overlooked.
- Indigenous Christians confronting the legacy of colonisation may be calling us into deeper repentance.
- LGBTQIA+ people describing how Christian teaching has wounded them may be asking us to hear their hurt before we defend ourselves.

Perhaps the first Christian response is not, "Let me explain why we are right," but: **"Tell me what this has been like for you."**

God has a long history of speaking through voices that religious institutions find inconvenient.

Matthew's Gospel begins this encounter with the question, "By what authority are you doing these things?"

Perhaps Jesus' deepest answer is not an argument but his life.

- Look at what happens around Jesus:
- people are healed and restored,
- outcasts are welcomed,

- the hungry are fed,
- the powerful are challenged, and
- those who felt worthless discover they are loved.

Now, there is his authority.

Whenever someone claims to speak for God, perhaps we should ask:

What does this theology produce?

Does it produce fear, shame, silence and exclusion? Does it protect powerful people while asking vulnerable people simply to endure?

Or does it produce life, dignity, compassion, justice, courage and freedom?

Repentance is not God demanding that we condemn ourselves. It is the possibility of changing direction: listening, learning, admitting we were wrong and beginning again.

The first son does not get it right the first time.

And that is the point.

God does not require us always to have been right. God asks whether we are still capable of listening, learning, turning and being changed.

Faithfulness is not stubbornly remaining where we have always been. Sometimes it means finding that God has moved ahead of us into unexpected places—and having the courage then to follow.

So the question Jesus leaves hanging in the Temple that day is also the question he leaves with us:

Are we still willing to be changed by God?

Amen.

