

**Pentecost 20 - Year A
28 September 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri**

Matthew 21:23-32

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

In many ways, I love being a lectionary preacher. Having a selection of texts from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures presented to me each week enables me, indeed forces me, to consider texts and to study texts and to interpret texts that I would probably just as soon avoid left to my own devices.

One downside of using the lectionary, though, is that we can miss some pretty important things if we don't read those portions of scripture that come between the Sunday readings. We have to sort of poke our head up out of the lectionary every once in a while to be sure we can see the terrain around us, always to keep the context and the flow of the gospel narrative in view.

The portion of Matthew's gospel between what we read last week and what we read today is a prime example of this. Last week, we read the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, probably more accurately titled the parable of the generous vineyard owner. And, today we have read a brief conversation between Jesus and the chief priests and elders as Jesus entered the temple and another parable about work in a vineyard.

But, oh, so much has happened between last week's reading and this reading today. The terrain has definitely changed; the narrative has literally moved to a new location and the entire story has taken a serious turn.

You see the location for today's reading is Jerusalem. Jesus has entered the symbolic center of religious power in what will be the last week of his life.

His execution by the Roman Empire is only a few short days away. The confrontation between Jesus and the religious and civil authorities that has been building is about to explode, to explode in the violent imperial act of crucifixion.

At the beginning of the 21st chapter of Matthew's gospel - the source of today's reading - Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. A donkey, the symbol of humble service not domination or military force. As he entered the city, he was greeted by the pilgrims who were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast, shouting "hosanna" - literally, "save us" - and laying their cloaks and tree branches in front of him. Jesus, greeted as a messiah and a king sitting on the back of a donkey. And, the city was in turmoil.

Now, the first place Jesus went after this amazing entrance into the city was the Temple, overturning tables and driving out those who did business there. Those who exchanged coins with the image of the emperor on them for coins that could be used to pay the Temple tax and those who sold doves that could be offered as sacrifices. Turning things upside down. Coins and furniture and people and doves flying everywhere!

And, then - right there and then - Jesus proceeded to heal the blind and the lame that came to him in the temple. The very ones who would have normally been excluded from Temple worship. Jesus, restoring the Temple to the House of Prayer that God had intended it to be and showing God's inclusive love to everyone. And, the very system of Temple worship was under attack.

It was no more business as usual in the Temple. And, the chief priests and elders knew it, and it made them angry.

They had to be more than a little nervous, too. You see the chief priests and elders worked alongside the Roman officials and the Roman-appointed governor Herod Antipas to maintain peace and security in this part of the Empire, and now that was all in jeopardy. They couldn't afford for this itinerant preacher and miracle worker from Nazareth to stir up the crowd of pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem. They couldn't let things get out of hand and risk the power of the mighty Roman Empire sweeping in to gain control.

The next day Jesus was in Jerusalem again. This time he came to the Temple and began teaching. Can you imagine that? Right in the heart of the religious leaders' domain. Jesus, teaching, interpreting Torah, interposing himself in the work that the priests and elders usually did. And, the chief priests and elders couldn't take it any more.

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

Jesus, just who do you think you are?

Jesus, you certainly don't look anything like the Messiah we expected. Born in an obscure place to obscure people. Why there are even rumors that your mother Mary was pregnant when she married Joseph the carpenter. You interpret Torah when you haven't had any real education or training for it. You seem to delight in breaking religious rules – touching lepers, talking in public with women, healing on the Sabbath. You eat with all the wrong kinds of people – people who are outright sinners. You go to parties with tax-collectors, those people who collaborate with the Roman Empire and extort money from their fellow citizens. You tell stories, parables, which don't seem to make any sense, outrageous, downright offensive.

And, now, you've come into Jerusalem during Passover, when the city is full of people, getting everyone all stirred up, making a mess of the Temple and healing people in the Temple who don't even belong there. Teaching and preaching where you're really not needed or wanted. You're risking the peace here in Jerusalem and if things get out of hand, well, the Roman Empire will never allow that.

Jesus, just who do you think you are?

Now, it can be so easy to write off the chief priests and elders here as the “bad guys.” Definitely, the villains in the story. But, were they really the “bad guys”?

The chief priests and elders were trying to be faithfully obedient God. They had devoted themselves to the study and interpretation of Torah, to worship and sacrifice in the Temple.

And, what about working with the Roman Empire? Well, they were trying to protect Jerusalem, the Temple, all those who lived and worshipped there. Peace and security in Jerusalem under the thumb of the Roman Empire. Well, it wasn't perfect. But, it was better than the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The chief priests and elders may have had the very best intentions, maybe they just told themselves that or maybe they really did. But, even with the best intentions, they were blind and deaf to God's activity in the world.

They had been blind and deaf to John the Baptist and his message of repentance. And now they were blind and deaf to Jesus. The Messiah who didn't look and sound like the Messiah they had expected. They may have had the very best intentions but they had missed Jesus, God incarnate in human flesh, standing right in front of them.

Seeing and hearing something new is always hard, isn't it? Accepting that things can be different from what we've grown used to can be hard, can't it? Having to be and to do differently from what has become comfortable for us can be hard, can't it?

Change, believing in things that don't meet our expectations, that can be more than hard. It can be threatening and frightening. It can make us angry. It can make us nervous. It can even test our faith.

Jesus, just who do you think you are?

But, the reality is that God is still living and active among us. God's revelation is not in the past tense. God continues to speak, and God continues to lead us forward. The

canon on God's mission in the world is definitely not closed. The Spirit moves and works and guides in our world today just as the Spirit moved at Pentecost over 2000 years ago.

And, sometimes – many times - God works in ways that we don't expect and sometimes it seems the Spirit leads us to places we don't expect. Sometimes God is working all around us and we are blind and deaf to God right in front of us; we are unable to see or to hear what God is doing. Or even more sadly we simply refuse to see and to hear what God is doing.

Maybe because it threatens us or frightens us or makes us angry or makes us nervous. Or, maybe it's just easier to keep things the way they are – not perfect, but safe. Change is too hard.

I believe that today's reading from Matthew's gospel leaves us - as individuals, as a parish, as the church – with critical questions.

Will we make the same mistake the chief priests and elders made that day in the Temple when Jesus stood right in front of them? And, what will we miss if we make that mistake?

Creative and active God, you continue to give us new revelation of yourself and your will for the world: calm our fears and make our spirits open to you, heal our blindness and deafness to you so we may see and hear you at work around us, and draw us ever closer in your inclusive love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who ever lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.