

Sunday 27 September – Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Liz Barnes

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

In the name of the living God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Authority is the issue in the Gospel. It was reasonable for religious leaders to ask the source of Jesus' authority, given he was in the Temple where he had caused disruption the previous day. If someone came into our church and started proclaiming things contrary to what we believe, we would have a duty to ask similar questions. The Church is very careful when licensing people for ministry, to indicate where their authority lies: it is God-given but expressed through the actions of the Church.

All our readings today wonderfully and provocatively explore personal responsibility as a willingness to confess brokenness and to solicit new learning. Doing so invites us to distinguish conventional religious authority from the authentic power of self-emptying love. But a sad truth about life today is that we witness no shortage of instances – many of which gather global media attention – of well-meaning Christians and church leaders falling short of Jesus' discipleship call to 'come and follow me'. The strength of this call comes paradoxically in personal habits of self-emptying.

Our readings all help us to drill down deeply into the root causes of our failures and self-contradictions, into those places deep within where we can suffer from a variety of urges: to blame others rather than accept responsibility, to nurture fears which can deplete and distort us, to preserve the status quo which resists the call to new and transformative ways, to indulge the solitary rather than unfurl compassion and appreciate the perspective of others, and perhaps most notably – for Matthew and even in our world today – to pursue and grasp at religious authority as idol. Our passages illumine these urges so-as-to pave the sure if costly paths of Christian living which heals us slowly but meaningfully of the shadows deep within the human condition.

Ezekiel calls for a listening heart, a receptivity to growth and learning and holiness stemming from a humility that knows and joyfully accepts its vocation to listen, to be humble, to be led. Ezekiel is concerned with an individual responsibility and change of heart required of everyone. It relates

closely to the Matthaean call to the Jewish leaders, who failed to respond to the preaching of John the Baptist and thereby sealed their own fate.

And then St Paul's in his epistle to the Philippians has something relevant to the issue to say, which is both accessible and helpful. This joyful letter offers instruction for maintaining a Christian attitude when life doesn't turn out the way we planned or hoped. He tells the people of Philippi "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus". Paul commends love, sharing, compassion, being of one mind, humility, and putting the interests of others first. Paul goes on to make clear the authority – the model – is Christ himself. The apostle Paul appeals for humility and service that takes its lead from Jesus himself.

Could there be a finer, more mediative statement on the humility of the "God of our salvation" than what we witness in this letter? All too acquainted with the factionalism and party spirit among the people of God, Paul reminds his readers that they are grounded not in themselves as individuals but together. We members who enjoy fellowship in the body of Christ share the vocation to be of the same mind and same love, to give others space.

Karl Barth, in his stunning pastoral insight comments on Philippians chapter two says that "it is not until I see the other's point of view that I myself really see. By means of others' thoughts I learn to think thoughts of my own. By giving freedom, I am free. By obeying I exercise myself in governing. Always my neighbour is the barrier but also the door. There is no road that passes him by". The people of God who are acquainted with humility of this sort are-able-to take and find their own lives enriched, confirmed, newly transformed in and by the fellowship of the body of Christ. Barth goes on to say, "from now on he is equal with God in the obscurity of the form of a servant".

This message is not just about Jesus; it's about us too. How we live our lives, how we in our own lives not only acknowledge but actually live Christ – become Christ in the world.

Even as religious authorities in Matthew's time as in our own are discovered to abuse power sometimes with horrific pastoral consequences we are all called to empty ourselves for each other, by confessing rather than hiding brokenness, by having the same love for each other even when we struggle to be of the same mind – there will always be differences of opinion – but

we are called to always try to disagree well and also by bearing compassion for each other even when some harm or discredit others.

All our readings are about turning, however slowly, from wickedness to righteousness, from disobedience to obedience. It can be embarrassing to have to change our minds, but it can also be a sign of maturity. As we ponder the readings this week and reflect on the Collect about being steadfast in faith and active in service, it might be worth reflecting on what causes us to change our minds when we need to, and what stops us from changing our minds when we ought to.

Amen