

September 25, 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible: Exodus 17: 1-7
Epistle Philippians 2: 1-13:
Gospel: Matthew 21: 23-32

MEDITATION: Challenging Authority!

Challenging authority is no easy matter, we all know this. The bigger question, I think, is which authority SHOULD we challenge and WHY! That might be even a harder question to ask ourselves. Whose authority should we resist, and if we do, WHY?

The scripture this morning gives us some confusing messages. The Israelites once again are grumbling against Moses. Even to the point that Moses is afraid they might become violent. And what is somewhat surprising is that God seems to quickly respond to their grumbling. The people are acting badly and yet they get what they need and want. What is the message here? Grumbling and acting badly gets you what you want? I bet anyone of us here can cite examples in our own lives when that has seemed to be born out in truth. Remember that old saying, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease". How many times in our own experience have we witnessed someone "getting" what they want because they cause a "big" fuss! Young children are often good at that – as our parents of these two beautiful little girls we baptized this morning, might be able to tell us! OR is the message more about those who are REALLY in need get what they ask for because their NEED is so great? Certainly the people could not survive in the desert without water, and God responded to that. God was with them, God, as God had promised, time and time again, would not abandon them but would get them through this difficult time of wandering in the desert. Life can seem like that some times, like wandering in a desert, and we too often need to be assured, that God will not leave us alone. I like to think that this message is more about a lesson in how to trust and maybe how to "ask nicely" rather than about resistance to the authority of Moses and ultimately of God.

And then once again Jesus takes the message a little further. This time we seem to be able to align pretty quickly with Jesus. Here is our beloved Jesus, once again up against the corrupt leaders, the keepers of the status quo. These were definitely insiders who had lots of authority in the sacred matters of the temple and not many of the Jewish faith dared to challenge them. We know from many of the stories in the Gospels that these folks were often a great deal less "sacred" than they should have been. Often it was about power and prestige and the ability as an insider to get what they wanted and to prosper at the expense of others. And they were in cahoots with the secular leaders of that time as well. I really like the Jesus that we see in this story because he is not afraid to challenge these folks and tell them in a pretty blunt manner that he was wise to their games. Jesus didn't mince his words... "Even the tax collectors and harlots (that is, two of the most despised outcast groups in society of that day) go into the kingdom of God before you insiders." .What's Jesus telling us here – be blunt and courageous and clearly name the bad behaviour of those who should know better? I like that, and I bet you do too. OR is Jesus saying that those who are so broken by life and trapped by their own complicity in trying to survive, will be the ones who get the very attention of God, and even get into the kingdom before the so called "righteous". Jesus isn't only standing up for what he

KNOWS is right but he is affirming God's attention and presence to those who are in the most NEED.

I know that you will agree with me when I say, It is no easy thing to know what is RIGHT in every question. Nor is it easy to know who is most in NEED. Life and leadership and authority can baffle us.

I have been watching carefully the debate that has been happening at the UN these last few days. The Middle East is a very difficult problem to understand. I watched both of the speeches by the leader of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu and the leader of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas and I agreed with what both of them said! I want to believe that the leaders at the UN general assembly, who must understand all of this much better than I, might be more able to discern the CORRECT way to go..... Or maybe not, because it seems pretty clear that the decisions that are made at the UN are deeply embedded in political posturing rather than in answering the question... WHAT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO? We can all look back and see that there have always been in history decisions that were backed by the UN that in retrospect are definitely not CORRECT. So what do we do? How do we answer these difficult questions of who gets what, and who needs what the most, and what is the answer to all this conflict that we see over and over again in our world. You will remember that a year ago I was in Israel right at this time. I saw with my own eyes, the poverty and difficult life of the Palestinians which stood in stark contrast to the seemingly much easier life of the Israelis. And yet, I hear the concern of Israel for security in the face of being surrounded by Arab nations that are clearly pretty powerful, non democratic and possibly corrupted by leaders interested mostly in their own power, prestige and ability to suppress their own people for personal gain. Which of these people need God's attention most? Whom should we stand with and whom should we stand against. Our country's leadership is definitely taking sides. Should we follow that? Clearly there is RIGHT on both sides of this question.

Maybe that is ultimately where God calls us to be. Those of us engaged in following Jesus must be deeply thoughtful and prepared to learn and debate and grow in our understanding if we are to be examples to a conflicted world. Yes we must stand against what is clearly WRONG and we must stand for those whom we see in the greatest NEED, here in our own lives and in the wider world. We must be careful about how we live and what we model. Isn't this what we are reminded of every time we engage in the sacrament of Baptism? We all have a great responsibility to the children in our midst. We must take that responsibility very seriously because for the most part children learn by what they see and experience much more than by what they are told. Jesus calls us to be careful about who we stand with and who we stand against. Jesus calls us to be certain that our own motives are coming from the best possible place of learning and understanding. It is always a pathway that is challenging to us and to how we live as individuals and as community in this world we have been given. If we are "insiders" we must be careful about the why and how of that. If we are "outsiders" we must be careful about how we challenge the status quo. The world needs the wisdom of God. Let us be a part of that. AMEN

