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Service for the 16th Sunday after Trinity, 27th September 2020

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The psalmist wrote: ‘Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me.’

Let us also seek the way and the truth of God.

HYMN: At the name of Jesus

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

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| 1. At the name of Jesus
every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him
King of glory now.
'Tis the Father's pleasure
we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning
was the mighty word. | 3. In your hearts enthrone him;
there let him make new
all that is not holy,
all that is not true.
He is God the Saviour,
he is Christ the Lord,
ever to be worshipped,
trusted and adored. |
| 2. Humbled for a season,
to receive a Name
from the lips of sinners
unto whom he came,
he became a witness,
faithful to the last,
and returned victorious
when from death he passed. | 4. When this same Lord Jesus
shall appear again
in his Father's glory,
there with him to reign,
then may we adore him,
all before him bow,
as our hearts confess him
King of glory now. |

Caroline M Noell

PRAYERS

Let us pray.

Into the mix of humanity, with friends and neighbours, visitors and strangers,
together we join to worship you, O Lord our God.

Generous, hospitable God, who turns no one away, welcome each one of us now in this
time of worship and gathering and embrace us in your being.

We sometimes think that the more we have, the happier we will be. ‘If only’, then all will be well. We sometimes turn the other way, closing our eyes and ears, ignoring what we see, choosing to neglect those asking for help. Sometimes we refuse a helping hand to those in need – we want to do ‘our thing’ instead.

We do not want to confess these things; but, Lord God, in this moment, in this place, in this space that we've been given, give us the desire to confess our failings and our sins. Renew us from within and set us free from all that shackles us. Set us free to be the human beings you would have us be.

We are grateful, Lord God, that you love us and care for us; that Jesus lived and died for us. We are grateful that you are interested in us, even with all our faults and failings. Thank you for sharing our lives and our living, for being within our hopes and dreams. Thank you for giving us purpose and meaning. Thank you for showing us how to live a life of goodness and truth, of caring and sharing. Thank you for your generosity and abundance, even if we fail to see it. Thank you, God, for being you and thank you for making us, us.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

St Matthew 21: 23-32

He entered the temple, and the chief priests and elders of the nation came to him with the question: 'By what authority are you acting like this? Who gave you this authority?' Jesus replied, 'I have a question to ask you too; answer it, and I will tell you by what authority I act. The baptism of John: was it from God, or from men?' This set them arguing among themselves: 'If we say, "from God", he will say, "Then why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "from men", we are afraid of the people, for they all take John for a prophet.' So they answered, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said: 'Then neither will I tell you by what authority I act.

'But what do you think about this? A man had two sons. He went to the first, and said, "My boy, go and work today in the vineyard." "I will, sir", the boy replied; but he never went. The father came to the second and said the same. "I will not", he replied, but afterwards he changed his mind and went. Which of these two did as his father wished?'

'The second' they said. Then Jesus answered, 'I tell you this: tax-gatherers and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For when John came to show you the right way to live, you did not believe him, but the tax-gatherers and prostitutes did; and even when you had seen that, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Thanks be to God.

ADDRESS: *Mr Geof Owen*

Actions speak louder than words

Every now and then my wife would ask me if I wanted to do something that I wasn't at all interested in doing. Now I could have just said that I wasn't interested, but I didn't. Instead, with irony and sarcasm in my voice, I would say, "Oh yes, I really want to spend the day shopping for clothes!" She would know from the tone of my voice and my actions and my strong aversion to shopping that what I was saying didn't match with what I meant. I was saying one thing and meaning something totally different. Though my mouth said, "I really want to spend the day shopping for clothes", the rest of my being was really saying, "please, please, please don't make me do it."

This is an obvious place where my words and my actions didn't match; but situations much less obvious can often arise as well. Maybe I'm saying yes to something that I really don't want to do, but feel I have to. My heart really isn't in it and therefore I don't put the energy I should into whatever it is. Maybe I have every intention of doing something and therefore say I will, but then don't actually ever get round to it. I'm sure we're all guilty of that sometimes. Maybe the way my words and actions don't match is that I don't speak up against something, or for something, when I really should because I'm afraid of how people will respond.

Whatever the reason, whatever the method, there is something wrong when our words and actions are not in line with each other. Our Gospel reading today speaks about people whose words and actions didn't line up. We find the leaders in the church questioning Jesus' authority.

They decide to play games in the way they question Jesus and we discover that he is able to beat them at their own game. The leaders are intimidated by Jesus. They don't know quite what to make of him, and he seems to have the people of Israel following him and his teachings. Therefore they ask a question of him, not to find out the answer but rather to trap him. They're more interested in playing games than learning something about Jesus. So they ask him what seems like a simple question, they ask by whose authority he's doing the things he does.

If he says by his own authority, they feel they can dismiss him. If he says by God's authority, they can say that he's a madman, that he's overreached his bounds. At the same time, they are also calling his credentials into question. They had been to schools. They had been to seminaries. They had the education and they had the official backing of the temple. Jesus had none of these. Instead he was merely a wandering teacher who had previously made his living as a carpenter.

Jesus knows that he can't win with the question they have asked, so he fires one back at them. He beats them at their own game. He asks them about John the Baptist, who went before him and who had a difficult relationship with them as well. "Where did John and his baptism come from?" Jesus asked. "From God or from man?" He put them in the same position that they had put him – and, of course, they didn't like it.

What seems strange about this story is the discussion that the religious leaders had among themselves. They didn't talk about whether they believed what John was doing had any merit. They didn't compare what John had taught with the scripture they knew. Instead, they looked at it purely from a political perspective: how will our answer make us look? If we say that John's baptism was from God, then we'll look bad for not listening to John. If we say it

was from man, we'll look bad for attacking a person the people like. How cynical, how depressing, how sad!

We hear again and again of people who are looking for truth, from people who are seeking to know God, that they think of themselves as spiritual. They want to believe in God and they think there is definitely something more to this world than just the physical. They're looking for meaning in their lives, but they just don't like organised religion.

Now organised religion can be a scapegoat for them. It may be that they don't like the idea of God – or anybody else – telling them how they should live or act or what they should do. Sometimes people allow their dislike for organised religion to be an excuse to avoid truly following where God is leading them. They see it as a structure that is more interested in its structure than the truth, more interested in money and power than in helping those it shepherds.

When we get organised in our faith and set up a structure, some things are lost that Jesus taught. All of a sudden, there's a hierarchy that Jesus doesn't seem very interested in. All of a sudden there is someone above you that is telling you what to believe so that you don't need to figure it out for yourself.

The interesting thing here is that Jesus doesn't have much to do with organised religion himself. He didn't find priests and prophets to have as the leaders of his church. He didn't have the Pharisees and Sadducees and teachers of the law as his primary followers. It seems that they were too interested in power and in trying to put Jesus in his place to really hear what it was he had to say. Jesus took tax collectors and fishermen, ordinary people to be his first disciples and then watched them grow into the leaders of his church.

Jesus tells the people, and specifically the temple leaders, a parable. The parable is very clear. There is a man who has work that he needs done and so he asks his two sons to go to the vineyard and do some work. One son shows a stubborn streak of independence and disobedience and says no to his father, but then finds himself able to and goes into the field and does what his father asks. The other son tells his father that he is going to do what he asks, but then doesn't. Jesus wonders which one did what his father asked. The answer is obvious. The actions speak louder than the words and what matters isn't what you *say* you're going to do, rather it's what you *do*.

We don't know what changed the sons' minds. Did the one who said he couldn't suddenly have a window in his diary? Did he change his mind because of guilt? Was his conscience working overtime until he decided to do the right thing? Or was he just being contrary with his father because he wanted to be, though he had every intention of going in the end.

Then there is the son who said he would go but didn't. Did he say 'yes' without thinking through whether he really could? Did he forget? Did something come up that kept him from going? When it comes down to it, we discover that intentions don't matter as much as results.

Jesus identifies the one who said 'no' and then mentions the tax collectors and the prostitutes: he identifies that son with the lost. These are the people who made bad decisions earlier in their lives and went off in the wrong direction, but then repented. They realised they were heading in the wrong direction and turned around. They came back and followed.

Jesus is looking at the leaders in the organised religion of the day as those who started in the right direction but then got side-tracked and ended up not following where God had led.

Many of us said 'yes' to God early in our lives and therefore we have a choice. Are we going to follow through with what we promised to do? Are we going to remain faithful to our God and go where he sends us, or are we going to let ourselves get distracted and turn away from God's call on our lives? Are we going to be like the Pharisees, or are we going to take a third way? This third way is the son who says yes to his father and then follows through with it.

It can seem easy to say 'yes' in the private stillness of our prayers or the security of a Sunday congregation, but can seem very different on a Monday morning in the cold light of day in a hostile world. He insists we count the cost, as best we can; but be quite sure, he never asks more than we can do or give.

There was also one son who said Yes and was as good as his word. At his testing in the desert, he said 'yes'; and in Galilee, Samaria, Judaea, Ephraim, in the agony of Gethsemane, and in the isolation of Golgotha, he kept faithful and obedient to the Father. Once committed, he kept on loving. Say 'yes' to him – he's as good as his word.

Amen.

HYMN: Lord of all hopefulness

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1. Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
whose trust, ever child-like, no cares could destroy,
be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.
2. Lord of all kindness, Lord of all faith,
whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
be there at our labour, and give us, we pray,
your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.
3. Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.
4. Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

'Jan Struther'

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Let us pray

So often we want to pray for others. But sometimes, God, we don't know how. We can't remember names or numbers; other issues weigh heavily on our hearts. Thank goodness, God, that you know what we mean when we pray.

So we bring in this moment those names and faces, images and desires for others that pop in and out of our minds throughout the day:

the old lady at the bus stop who needed a hand up the step;
the young mum at the checkout trying to contain her four children;
the man up the road who's lost his dog and is calling for him;
the teachers struggling to understand the needs of those in their class;
the doctor who wants to give us more time but who simply can't;
the young families who can't make ends meet;
those without work, who can't find new jobs;
those helping people to find work, knowing it is an uphill struggle;
those with mental health issues and seeking help,
or who are afraid and ashamed to seek help,
or who are ignored and can't get help.

So, God, for all these people and countless others, we offer our prayers.

We know you do not need reminding, but you do need willing workers – even us – to help them know your love and have their needs met.

Hear our ramblings, O God.

Amen.

HYMN: Forth in thy name

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

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| 1. Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,
my daily labour to pursue,
thee, only thee, resolve to know
in all I think or speak or do. | 3. Thee may I set at my right hand,
whose eyes my inmost substance see,
and labour on at thy command,
and offer all my works to thee. |
| 2. The task thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil!
In all my works thy presence find,
and prove thy good and perfect will. | 4. Give me to bear thine easy yoke,
and every moment watch and pray,
and still to things eternal look,
and hasten to thy glorious day. |
| 5. For thee delightfully employ
whate'er thy bounteous grace hath given,
and run my course with even joy,
and closely walk with thee to heaven. | |

Frances Ridley Havergal

BLESSING

May we go, Lord God, to meet the needs of others and share the love we have from you.

Amen.