

Obedient ?

1 10 17

O Lord, we beseech you to mercifully hear the prayers
of your people who call upon you:
and grant that they both perceive and know
what things they ought to do,
and also may have the grace and power
faithfully to fulfil them.

Our text this morning may be found in St Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2
and verse 6: **'obedient to the point of death –
even death on the cross.'**

Schools went back last month, La Rentrée here in France, but back in England in
three weeks time Half Term and once again a break from the discipline of getting
up in the morning and going to school. And my question to you this morning –
'Were a good pupil ?' Did you enjoy school ? Did you like your teachers ? Were
the lessons fun ? Did you enjoy learning and find the discipline light, easy to
conform to what was required, no problem in obeying the rules and keeping out
of trouble ? Now memory can be deceptive but I think I was a good pupil most of
the time and I really did enjoy my time at school so much so that I became a
teacher myself for 33 years and one term before I came here to Dinard as your
priest in January 2007.

In today's gospel, Matthew is focusing on the sharp division between the religious establishment in Jerusalem and Jesus. The chief priests and the elders of the people are out to catch Jesus out so they ask him a simple, direct question: 'By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority ?' They want to know on whose authority Jesus is preaching and teaching and acting in the way he does. It's a great trap because it goes to the heart of the matter and it's a chance for them to challenge him by accusing him of blasphemy if he claims that God has told him to do what he's doing.

Well, Jesus is a clever Jew and answers their question with a question. He'll answer their question if they'll answer his. And Jesus asks them an equally loaded question 'Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin ?' Great question because if they say it was, then Jesus can ask why they didn't take proper notice of him. And if they say it wasn't, then they'll alienate popular opinion which thought John the Baptist was the real deal.

Understandably, they won't answer his question so Jesus doesn't have to answer theirs. But in fact he has by saying nothing - in saying nothing, Jesus has drawn an implicit parallel between himself and his cousin, John: both derive their inspiration and motivation from obeying God our Father.

Then, an odd parable to further make his point: father and two sons and work to be done in the family's vineyard. The father asks one son to go and do the work and he says no but then he does. The father asks the other son who says yes and then he doesn't. And the simple question: 'Which son, which one, obeys his

father ?’ And the answer is the one who does what he’s asked to do, not the one who says he will and doesn’t. And there, in a nutshell, the problem with the Sadducees and Pharisees, with the priests and the religious authorities: they say they will obey God and they do – by keeping the letter of the Law. But what they fail to do is to keep the spirit of the Law by loving God and by showing that love through love of neighbour and stranger even as they love themselves.

And so back to our text today from Philippians, ‘obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross’, part of the famous passage written by Paul on the nature of the incarnation – Jesus, the son of God, who becomes embodied to fulfil the will of God – and the cost is his death on the cross. It is a model of obedience for us to emulate.

And so let me end again with a question: ‘Just how obedient are you to the will of God for us ?’

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew’s, Dinard

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G: Sermons 36 :Obedient

