



Sermon: 27 September 2026

Rev. Hugh Perry

Exodus 17: 1-7

Matthew 21:23-32

ARE WE NEARLY THERE YET?

Maurice Andrew tells of the text his grandparents had on the wall which read 'Streams in the desert' (Isaiah 35:6). He says:

'We had all been affected to some extent by the 1930's Depression but my grandparents lived by the broadly flowing Waikato and we, by the swift Rangitikei. I doubt whether any of us could have even imagined what a desert was like. So why did they have the text and why do I remember it? I think, because everyone realises they can have something akin to a wilderness experience in their life and that it is the very place where they are most refreshed. The wilderness may be hostile, but it is there that the relationship with the environment can be renewed, both physically and metaphorically.' ¹

Once again, we see the tendency to look back to the security of the past when facing the uncertainty of the future and the difficulty of the present. At this stage the people have been miraculously fed by the quails and the manna but past slavery still seems more secure than to trust God in an uncertain future. Some green movements exhibit the same tendency in the face of undoubted environmental concerns to want to revert to past ways of life that seem less threatening but in reality, people were held in the slavery of dangerous toil, seasonal disasters and devastating disease.

In the previous chapter the Exodus people had complained about lack of food and now they complain about lack of water.

Both are legitimate complaints and both echo the concern of the child on a long journey as they cry 'Are we nearly there yet?'

However, although to set out on the journey of life was the result of a decision our parents made, we can't rely on other people to solve all our problems along the way. Furthermore, in the journey of life it is unproductive to continue to be asking 'Are we nearly there yet?'

¹ Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999)p. 105

That is particularly true for me who noted my eighty-second birthday yesterday. It is much more productive to put stickers on the face of a sleeping passenger and count the dead possums on the road.

Of course, the Israelites had already counted the quails they had eaten in the evening and were probably still a bit mystified about the breakfast mana that was served up each morning.

But their journey from slavery to freedom was teaching them that although there was some security in slavery, freedom involved sustaining themselves in the wilderness.

The risk of looking back is that we tend to minimise the struggles and maximise the good memories.

In the previous chapter the Israelites began their complaint by saying it would be better if they had died as slaves than face hunger in the wilderness. In today's reading, the fact that death is quite likely as a result of slavery is forgotten in the face of the reality that death can be a direct result of lack of water.

That is a very basic truth that is becoming a reality as hot winds burn forests across Europe and North America, while the Press carries a story about fire authorities closing the Port Hills and although rate rises will be capped, we will have to pay extra for water.

That's all a bit scary so let's look at our Gospel reading where Jesus has moved from his ministry in Galilee to teaching in the temple. Of course, the temple elite come and question Jesus' authority to do so. It wasn't so much that he didn't have a theology degree and a Deplomer of Ministry. The system was different and their authority was very clear; the priests' authority was by birth, the scribes' by training and the elders' by wealth. They are the religious, social, economic, and political elite and their power and authority were sanctioned by Rome.

Their questions were a cunning plan. They were a trap because if Jesus claimed his own authority, he admits to having no institutional or cultural authority. Therefore, he is acting against God's purpose. If he claims God's authority he blasphemes and violates their jurisdiction.

Jesus' response of quoting John the Baptist puts them in a difficult political situation. So, they avoid giving an answer. That allows him to avoid their question and turn the questioning on them. Jesus does that with the parable of the two sons and in answering his question they condemn themselves. The descriptions of those coming to John to be baptised did not include tax collectors and prostitutes but these people have been mentioned in Jesus' merciful and transforming associations with marginalised people. Nevertheless, John prepared the way for that ministry of Jesus.²

Bill Loader makes the point that the vineyard is a standard image of Israel. The chief priest and elders are set in contrast to the prostitutes and tax collectors. The former engages in the rhetoric of obedience but fail to do God's will. The latter disqualify themselves, then turn to God and Loader suggests that all this is in response to the ministry of John the Baptist.

² Warren Carter *Mathew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading*, (London/New York: T&T Clark

Matthew has a way of cutting through the red tape and of by-passing the religious bureaucracy. There is no room for pretence or pretentiousness. At least some of the prostitutes and tax collectors, the distasteful rich and the women they exploited, got the point. They allowed themselves to be vulnerable, to be moved, to let the word of compelling compassion address their deeper needs. Were the religious leaders so defensive in protecting their system - in the name of the people of God and the Scripture - that they suppressed their inner cries, stopped their ears?

It is odd, Loader maintains, that we still find so many people inside the church who have a greater problem moving with compassion for change in society than many outside the church. Too many of us seem bent on protecting God.³

The issue in our Gospel reading involves Temple authority challenging Jesus' authority to preach in the Temple. They believed that rituals and set rules kept people safe and that is a disease that has infected churches throughout history.

We have two thousand years of hindsight and yet still debate what we believe and what Jesus was trying to say. Many of us don't believe racist church leaders need a whole cache of rifles. We remember the news reports of mass suicides and murderous adventures of those led by the preaching of faith leaders inspired by a spirit most of us would struggle to understand as Holy. And of course, no one expects 'The Spanish Inquisition', especially in the middle of a Monty Python sketch.

Therefore, it is safer for all concerned that those of us who profess a divine calling have that call thoroughly tested and our training and professional performance monitored. However, the balance of working within an institutional framework and an institution's inbuilt ability to stifle creativity and new initiatives is very much a knife edge.

It is that balancing point within Temple Judaism that provides the background for this morning's parable that anybody who has or has had teenage children will be able to identify with.

In that context of the balance between institution and initiative we can see the Temple and its priesthood proclaiming its authority to mediate between God and humanity. That is an authority that it held for generations. But it was Jesus who was actually making that link for his followers, and for generations to come. The irony is that Jesus' followers became institutionalised for sound reasons. But then the institutions focused on survival above caring for people.

The beauty of Parables is that they are not allegories and do not give straight answers. They challenge their listeners to draw their own conclusions from their own context. Therefore, even though we can understand the situation of Jesus' first listeners, the message they received might not be the message for us. But that first context and the message received has the power to relate the parable's challenge to us.

For those of us within the institutionalised church we can understand the security of the Christ message protected in the wrappings of institutionalised Christianity.

But the parable also reminds us of our individual responsibility within the institutional church. We are called to challenge that institution and keep it honest and on task.

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPentecost16.htm>

As reformed Christians I suggest that we have a tradition of holding the institution to account.

As a congregation we have opposed our Assembly's ruling that excludes homosexuals from Church leadership and I am proud to be part of that quiet rebellion. I can still remember sitting in the general assembly after it finally put that resolution into church law.

It was the end of the session and the end of about ten of attending Assembly and strategy meetings. On that day I just sat there like a stunned mullet. Suddenly I felt the Rev Dr Margret Mayman's hand on my shoulder and when I turned around, she said she had to go on TV.

I assured her she would be fine and that I was sure she had something prepared to say, to which she said: 'I need a straight man – come.'

So, I went and spoke to that frightening battery of lenses. The Assembly was at St Kentigerns College and when I got back to my son's place my little granddaughter said: 'We saw you on TV. Why were you on TV?' I explained that I was at a conference at her dad's school and the TV people want me to tell them about what we decided. To which she replied: 'You were at my dad's school, that's cool!'

My son was more direct - he thought I should resign but I said I would stay and be a nuisance.

At both settlement boards I have faced, I have stated that I will only serve in an inclusive congregation and at St Albans Uniting, the Methodist Church supported that inclusion. When I retired, the Presbytery still granted me the honour of Minister Emeritus, so I presume I still have some merit left.

Through the memory of his teaching and the empathy and loving kindness, Jesus left his disciples at the empty tomb with the burning desire that his death was not the end. As they set out as his Apostles, they were reinforced by those who wrote Gospels in their names. They sent the call of Christ through history towards us.

Our calling is not to maintain rules, structures and buildings although these are important for any community. The Spirit of the inclusive Risen Christ calls us to see Christ in others and be Christ to those we meet along the way.

In this hardened and hardening secular world it is our calling as Christians, and as a parish, to break open the rock of secularism and let the living waters of Christ flow into our world.

Amen