**Church Sermon – 25th September-20**

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord and Redeemer. Amen**

Today’s Gospel reading from Matthew’s Gospel (also covered in the gospels of Mark and Luke) shares the story of how the Pharisees demanded to know where Jesus got his authority.

If Jesus said his authority came from God, they would accuse Him of blasphemy. If he said he was acting on his authority, the crowds would be convinced that the Pharisees had the greater authority. But Jesus answered them with an unrelated question that exposed their real motives. **Did John’s authority to baptise come from heaven or was it merely human?”** The Pharisees didn’t want an answer to their question, they only wanted trap him. Jesus showed the Pharisees wanted the truth only if it supported their views.

What was John the Baptist’s authority?

According to the first chapter of John’s Gospel, John spoke the truth, challenging the community present to turn from their sins and baptising them as a symbol of their repentance. They responded by the hundreds. But as people moved towards him, he pointed to someone beyond himself, Jesus Christ. John knew that his role was to announce the coming of Jesus.

**The authority of Jesus, on the other hand, moved people to repentance and goaded others to resistance and resentment. John had completed his mission when he was executed by Herodias, the woman illegally married to King Herod at that time.**

The second part of today’s Gospel reading also discusses authority.

The son who said he would obey his father and then didn’t represented many people in Israel at that time, in particular, the religious leaders. They said they wanted to do God’s will, but they constantly disobeyed - which undermined their spiritual authority. They were phony, just going through the emotions without any substance which brought the Word of God into disrepute. People’s belief was disrupted leading to lost opportunities for greater faith and commitment to God.

**It is therefore dangerous to *pretend* to obey God when our heart is far from God. God knows our true intentions. Our actions must, must match our words.**

So, what does it mean to pretend to obey God when our heart is far from God?

Many of us are driven by guilt. We spend our entire lives running from regrets and hiding our shame. Guilt driven people are manipulated by memories. We allow our past to control our future. We often unconsciously punish ourselves sabotaging our success.

We obey God but our hearts are far from God

Many of us are driven by resentment and anger. We hold onto hurts and never get over them. Instead of releasing pain through forgiveness, we rehearse it over and over again in our minds. Some resentment driven people clam up and internalise anger , while others blow up and explode it onto others . Both responses are unhelpful and unhealthy.

We obey God but our hearts are far from God.

Some of us are driven by the need for approval. We allow the expectations of our parents or spouses or children or teachers or friends to control our lives. Many adults are still trying to earn the approval of unpleasable parents. Others are driven by peer pressure, always worried **what others might think on the outside, my public face rather than the face of Jesus inside me**. Unfortunately, those who follow the crowd get lost in it.

We obey God but our hearts are far from God

Knowing our purpose gives meaning to life. We were made to have meaning. Many people try other meaning like astrology and psychics to discover it, but to no avail. When life has meaning, we can bear almost anything, without it nothing is bearable. A young man in his twenties wrote: **“I feel like a failure because I’m struggling to become something, and I don’t even know what it is. All I know how to do is get by. Someday, if I discover my purpose, I’ll feel I am beginning to live”.**

We obey God but our hearts are far from God

But what do we make of Covid-19 and new Government rules following increased infections:

* According to Doris Zagdanski, US Author & Educator, the COVID-19 pandemic is reminding us of the impact **loss and grief** can have on our daily lives – it’s all around us now as we are forced to adapt to changes we never anticipated;
* Almost nothing about our lives has been untouched by change, including how we work, go shopping, go on holidays, schooling, socialising, exercising and even handshaking.
* Where there is loss, there will always be grief;
* Grief is about the way we react to loss and change – how we think about it, how we feel about it, how we then act in response to those thoughts and feelings and how our grief affects our health and wellness;
* In a COVID-19 world, people are describing their reactions using words such as “lonely”, “anxious”, “isolated”, “worried”, “stressed” and “angry”.

Doris also says: “It’s important to understand that these reactions are normal. There is nothing wrong with you because we are feeling overwhelmed or out of sorts. Frustration and anxiety can be heightened because many decisions have been taken out of our hands and there is uncertainty about what the future will look like. We are also in unfamiliar territory, whether it’s social distancing, working from home or home-schooling our children. Our comfort levels are being stretched to their limits.”

But we must do our very best with greater self-awareness, divine attitudes and prayer - to maintain our obedience of God to keep our hearts close to God

Exodus 17

This Old Testament reading highlighted a time of complaints and anxiety by the Jewish community.

The whole community of Israel left the wilderness of sin and moved from place to place. Eventually they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Once more, they complained to Moses. Give us water to drink. Tormented by their thirst, they argued – **“why did Moses bring us out of Egypt? Was Moses trying to kill us and our livestock with thirst?”** Then Moses cried out to God and God responded to strike the rock from which water gushed.

Moses named the place Massah which means test and Meribah which means arguing. This is because the people of Israel argued with Moses – “Is the Lord here with us or not?

**The Israel community obeyed God but their hearts were far from God – thus leading them to argue, stress and complain!**

**Relevance of today’s lesson**

You see some problems can be resolved by careful thought or re-arranging our priorities. Some can be re-arranged by discussion and good counsel. Some problems though are only resolvable by divine attitudes and prayer. **Divine attitudes and prayer draw us to obeying God more frequently to point our hearts towards God!**

We should make a determined effort to grow or nurture divine attitudes and prayer when we are:

* Driven by guilt
* Driven by resentment and anger
* Driven by the need for approval
* Struggling to find our purpose in life
* Anxious by grief and loss because of Covid-19

If we feel like complaining, it only raises our level of stress. No divine attitude means things we do are in the wrong spirit, wrong motives. It’s not about God but me! There is no vertical relationship between God and me leading to no movement between here under his anointing or leadership. In the words of Timothy, **[2 Timothy 3:7](http://www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/niv/2-timothy/3/)**, Always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth**. That Jesus Christ by his life example and teachings feed our divine attitudes.**

Prayer and positive divine attitudes quieten our thoughts, brings rest to restless hearts and prepares us to hear God – which draws near to God. What’s really important is where God sits elevated in heaven. From where He sits, there are no impossibilities, no blockages, unsolvable problems, limited spiritual resources or hope. He has them all in abundance with forgiveness. We can call the Royal telephone line at any time and we will get answers no matter the circumstances. All because we obeyed God and our hearts are near to Him.

**Elisabeth Elliot said: “Open hands should characterize the soul’s attitude toward God – open to receive what he wants to give, open to give back what he wants to take”.**

Today’s New Testament reading from the second chapter of Philippians in the words of Apostle Paul invites to consider our attitude before God as part of personal healing in these desperate times – “Open hands – open to receive and open to give back”.

We receive God when we remember that Jesus did not think of equality with God as something to cling to; gave up his divine privileges, took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. Jesus died a criminal’s death on a cross.

**Jesus did it all for me**

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour, gave Him a name above all names, that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow in heaven and earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Yes, Christ did for me. He showed mercy and God pardoned my sins setting me free of my past, helped me to rediscover myself and find my purpose. **I received Christ and drew near to Him - to save my soul and obey him thereafter.**

In conclusion, I quote the words of Bernard Edinge: **"Inside the will of God there is no failure. Outside the will of God there is no success".**

**Amen**