



## Peters Green News Sheet Issue No: 29

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### Dangerous Conversations – Matthew 21:23-32

As we encounter Jesus in the gospel today, it is the final week of his life. It has been an extremely eventful time so far! Just one day earlier, he had entered Jerusalem accompanied by shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David,” as people were proclaiming him king. He had then gone to the temple and literally turned the tables, knocking them over as he drove out the money changers. He called the temple a “den of robbers.” Eventful times, to say the least. Now, things are becoming intense and there is growing controversy between Jesus and the temple leadership, bordering on violent confrontation. Now, on the morning of the next day, Jesus has returned to the temple. As he enters, he is confronted by the chief priests and elders of the people who try to trap him with a question about *authority*. As would be expected, they think they are the ones who are in charge and they have ultimate authority at the temple. So, they demand to know, “By what authority are you doing these things?” Believing they have control and are in charge, they are ready to challenge whatever Jesus says.

Well, the chief priests and elders discover that challenging Jesus results in some very dangerous conversations. They are very dangerous because Jesus is always going to twist and turn your thinking, leave your head spinning and leave you feeling confounded. Jesus is always going to be moving us beyond the safety of our preconceived notions, perspectives and ideas about God.

What they are not prepared for is hearing that Jesus’ authority comes not from another human being but from heaven. Jesus avoids the trap and turns the tables on the religious leaders with a thorny question of his own, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin.” This is a very dangerous question because, in making a commitment about John’s *authority*, the religious leaders would also make a commitment about John’s witness to Jesus – and thus Jesus’ authority.

In one move, Jesus outwits the religious leaders, places the question back on them and unmasks their deepest priorities and concerns. You see, the religious leaders are not really interested in Jesus’ true identity or in discovering how God would have them respond to Jesus. No, what they are interested in is maintaining their privilege, power and control and keeping the current order intact. They want to keep Jesus in their tidy little box or have nothing to do with him.

The religious leaders are left speechless and the interview appears to have ended. However, Jesus does not stop. He knows they are off balance and confounded and so, he tells them a story – one of his favourite teaching tools. He tells a parable of two sons. When the father directs the first son to go and

work in the vineyard, the mouthy and rebellious son emphatically answers, "I will not go." But then, he changes his mind and goes anyway. The second son, who appears dutiful and obedient, answers that he will go, but then he does not. When Jesus asks his questioners which of the sons did the will of his father, they say, "The first."

Another dangerous conversational moment! According to this parable, those who are seemingly "in the know" are not the ones who are doing the will of God. In another shock moment, the tables are again turned. Jesus' teaching stories and questions are seldom about right answers. Rather, they are about calling his followers and his hearers to be transformed. The question really is not about what is the will of God. It is about the deeper question of who belongs in God's realm or kingdom. In today's gospel, through this exchange and his questions, Jesus convicts the scribes and elders of their lack of belief, and finally asserts that the despised, faithful tax collectors and prostitutes will enter heaven before they will. Talk about dangerous conversation! This whole exchange begins with the "in the know" religious leaders authoritatively questioning Jesus, and ends with a pronouncement that they will follow behind reviled tax collectors and shunned prostitutes into heaven.

Yes, conversations with Jesus are dangerous conversations! Jesus is not interested in simply talking with us about the meaning of life. He confronts us with the issue of his identity and the call to faith in him. Again today, Jesus is really asking the central question of the gospels: "Who do you say that I am?" And, Jesus is not about small talk or beating around the bush. Jesus wants our very lives, and he is going to do whatever it takes, even going to the extreme measure of ultimately dying on a cross, to unmask our mistaken, deadly priorities and call us to faith in him.

We do not begin by interviewing Jesus, but by believing in him, trusting in his authority and following him to the places where he goes. While doing this, our world is always going to be turned upside down and inside out, our heads left spinning and our tongues confounded. We discover that the privileged – which I dare say are people like most of us, people who are type A, take charge, well-qualified people – the privileged are not leading the parade.

Dangerous conversations. In an encounter that will more than likely leave our egos and self-estimation bruised and in tatters, we will discover that no matter how much we think we are in control and in charge, whether it be our own lives, the circles in which we function and live, or even the community of faith, we are not. It is God alone who is in charge. And, we discover that it is the despised and rejected, the prostitutes, the loathed tax collectors, the reviled "others", and the most vulnerable of the world that are leading this parade as we follow Jesus. And, we like the privileged religious leaders, are always going to discover that our preconceived notions and perceptions of who Jesus is will always be shattered. Jesus will never be captured, controlled, or made to fit into our little boxes. He is always going to disrupt the ways in which righteousness and privilege, piety, and power try to control and manage. Jesus will always elude our grasp so that we may be grasped by him and by God's immeasurable grace and boundless love for all. And once we have been grasped by God's grace, the tables have truly been turned. Then, we can truly celebrate a love that is indiscriminate, boundless in mercy, and life-giving for all.

Erwin

Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious;  
See the Man of sorrows now;  
From the fight returned victorious,  
Every knee to Him shall bow;  
Crown Him! Crown Him!  
Crown Him! Crown Him!  
Crowns become the Victor's brow.

Crown the Savior! Angels, crown Him!  
Rich the trophies Jesus brings;  
In the seat of pow'r enthrone Him,  
While the vault of heaven rings:  
Crown Him! Crown Him!  
Crown Him! Crown Him!  
Crown the Savior King of kings.



Hark! those bursts of acclamation!  
Hark! those loud triumphant chords!  
Jesus takes the highest station;  
O what joy the sight affords!  
Crown Him! Crown Him!  
Crown Him! Crown Him!  
King of kings, and Lord of lords!

