

The Opposite(s) of Trust

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Text: Exodus 17.1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' So Moses cried out to the LORD, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The LORD said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'

Matthew 21.23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind

and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

As so often happens in these stories, one feels a little sympathy for the Pharisees and the elders of the people. There they are in the Temple, trying to make a go of their religion in a hostile political environment, serious in their longing for righteousness, and conscious of the importance of their task. Possibly a touch self-important in their sense of ownership of God's laws and God's holy place, the Temple ...

But Jesus makes them look so foolish – so chickenhearted and fussy, so spiritually inept, so lacking in wisdom. The day before, Jesus has actually turned over the tables in his indignation, so of course, they know he isn't just dropping by for a quick prayer. When he appears in the Temple this second day, they rush over to him in all their officious anxiety – by what authority do you say these things? And instead of answering, Jesus pushes back, teases them into the recognition that they are afraid of the people, and uncertain about God. In asking about John the Baptist, Jesus forces them to speak a deeper truth – "We do not know." And Jesus just laughs. *Well, you don't know much! So I am certainly not going to tell you where my authority comes from!*

Of course, reading this as Christians, and knowing the whole story, we receive this comic vignette with some pleasure. We appreciate the repartee as Jesus counters and destabilizes his opponents. As readers we are on his side, and so we enjoy his little victory. Perhaps, though, we also remember that it will be short lived, for this story takes place on the Monday before his arrest on Thursday.

Even so, though the encounter may be amusing, the questions the Pharisees are raising are serious. Anyone who comes to tell us new and inspiring truths deserves to

be questioned, whether it is a TV evangelist or a university professor or a political candidate. Quite apart from the immediate content of a lecture or sermon or campaign speech, these second order questions are completely legitimate.

Why should we listen to you, we ask. Why should we believe you? Why would we trust what you are saying? Is it because of the logic of your arguments, or your excellent rhetoric. Or because you say you are speaking in God's name, or in the name of science, or in the name of a particular political party? Should we be convinced by your multiple university degrees and academic accomplishments, or by your sincerity and your smile?

These second-order questions are especially relevant at election time. When we vote for a person or a party, we are offering them a small piece of our own power. We say, I will allow you to speak for me. I agree to follow the laws that you will pass. And that is a gesture of trust. Ultimately, it is trust that we offer in an election.

It is the question of trust that arises both among the Pharisees in the temple, and among their ancestors in the wilderness, in the story that Pat read from Exodus. Why are we going along with this, they ask. *Is God with us or not?* To be fair to them, they have already demonstrated an amazing amount of trust – they have left their homes to follow an ill-spoken visionary named Moses and his more articulate brother Aaron. Now lost and thirsty, they falter and cry out. And a little later, their anxiety and their thirst are assuaged by the flow of water from a rock.

The ostensible lesson is that we should trust, simply and fully – but is blind trust really a virtue? The scripture isn't completely sure of this. A few chapters later we see the people of Israel led very far astray by their trust in a golden calf. And fifteen hundred years farther along, Jesus often warns his followers against the charlatans and false prophets who will surely arise. Trust can be a mixed blessing.

One of the greatest insights of the Greek philosopher Aristotle was that a virtue has not one opposite, but two. Take courage as an example. An obvious opposite of courage is cowardice. If you don't have enough courage you are fearful and cowardly, you will not be able to achieve a good outcome when you face a challenge or hardship. But on the other side of the ledger – if you have what might be called too much courage – you may be reckless. And your recklessness may be just as damaging to the outcome. The virtue of courage is found between two extremes, one in which there is not enough of it and the other, in which there is too much. [Golden Mean]

The same logic applies to trust. People who trust too little are cynical and disengaged. “All politicians are the same,” they say. “Why bother to vote?” Or, as in the wilderness of Sin, in our Exodus reading, “This is hopeless, now we are going to die, we should have stayed in Egypt.” Or as the Pharisees in the Temple, “This man is a rabble-rouser, don’t listen to him, he is dangerous.” But cynicism is blinding. These are the people who look around them and do not see how the water of life springs forth out of dry and rocky places. They’ll never be able to experience the ways in which, as Jesus put it, the Kingdom of God is at hand, it is among you. The wellspring of wisdom is already flowing.

But we don’t want to err on the other side either – it is not a virtue to be credulous, to trust unfounded promises. It is not a sign of your goodness to give your life savings to a swindler, or to believe every health scare that comes through on a wide-circulation email. The right way of trusting is to be found somewhere between its two opposites trusting too much, and not trusting enough.

And of course, as we can plainly see, that kind of appropriate trusting will not be predetermined, but will depend upon many factors. It will depend especially upon the trustworthiness of the other party. There is always a relationship involved – whether it is between a politician and a voter, or between the people of Israel and their God, or between Jesus and his listeners. This is what we see in both scripture stories today. Trust and trustworthiness are critically linked.

This is the link Jesus is making when he moves to the parable about the two sons. He is asking us to reflect on what it is that makes a person trustworthy. One son says yes, yes, but then doesn’t show up. The other says he won’t help, but he does. As he so often does, what Jesus stresses is the concrete. What was the actual outcome? Did something happen, was there a change? What was the follow-through? Even the Pharisees can see the point.

In the most subtle and wonderful analogy, Jesus has acted out his own parable. He says to the Pharisees that he will not tell them where his authority comes from. But then he does tell them. It comes from the concrete, specific, and particular products of his efforts. Jesus says, you saw what happened to the ones who really listened to John, but you didn’t take it in. Come on, he says, look at me. My authority comes from the reality of my healing, teaching, consoling work.

And really, it’s still true today. Now as then, Jesus says, if this – this faith, this whole religion, what he says, what we do – if all this accomplishes nothing for you, for

the poor, for the world, then never mind, just walk away. But if it does, then the water of life is flowing and the Kingdom is at hand. Thanks be to God.

Amen.