

## BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Matthew 21:23-32

### **Introduction**

One of my grandsons used to say when he was in a particularly rebellious mode, “You are not boss over me; only mummy is.” Then later when his mother quizzed him on a particular action he would respond, “But Grandpa said I could.” He had and has a very refined sense of how authority and obedience worked.

Jesus has his authority questioned in the Gospel reading for today. Effectively the leaders of the people pull him up and say, “Hey, who gave you the right?” “Why should we listen to you?”

Why the question? Why the confrontation? After all, we only usually call authority into question when we are afraid or feel that someone has overstepped the mark. But mostly it is simply about the fact that it might require us to obey.

So the way to avoid that is to ridicule the authority.

The ancients were no different. The notion of honour and shame were linked to authority so that if you could link someone’s honour to public shame and humiliation then their authority and thus

power would be destroyed. Tabloid TV and newspapers perform the same function in our society.

Now perhaps you get the flavour of today's debate.

## **Context**

Matthew portrays the ministry and mission of Jesus as the conflict between the empire of God and the empire of this world. In this instance, the leadership of the people represent the empire with which Jesus is in conflict. And that must inevitably raise the question of authority.

## **The question of Jesus' authority**

The question of authority and who has the power that flows from it is one that dominates our life together as an democratic, pluralist community and as a church community. We can't avoid the question. It underlies almost all our public debates. People often reduce public debates about euthanasia and abortion, immigration and sending troops to war to issues of authority. It is usually posed in the question; what right have you to tell me/us what to do?

So for a moment let's reflect on power and authority. Power is the capacity to do something. Authority is the legitimation of that power. We give the police power and authority. We give them power to make arrests. We give them authority to do so in the law. We circumscribe power by limiting authority. They can't arrest anybody

they feel like. If they do we some times call it an abuse of power. An abuse of power is going beyond the limits of the stated authority.

So now we return to Jesus and the leaders. You see, Jesus overstepped the mark, yesterday. Their time, of course. Jesus yesterday had ridden into Jerusalem in some sort of procession, to the obvious adoration of some followers. After that he had gone to the Temple and thrown over the money changers' tables. He then did a prophetic action just like an OT prophet; he withered a fig tree thereby denouncing the barren fruitless leadership of Israel.

He has challenged their leadership. They are rightly afraid and angry. Hence their question, "By what authority...?"

So today (in the story Jesus' time) Jesus is teaching in the Temple. What temerity! What if someone came in off the street and started teaching in here after publicly shellacking and humiliating us? What would you ask? Where do you come from? Who sent you? What education do you have? In other words, "By what authority...?"

But there is an underlying, covert contest here. Who will win the hearts and minds of the people of God? Will it be the appointed, status ridden hereditary succession, the religious aristocracy? Or will it be the prophet who cleanses the temple, withers a fig tree in judgement, and teaches. Teaching linked to symbolic actions is a powerful tool. It may change hearts and minds.

So the question; “By what authority are you doing these things?”

Jesus confronts them unexpectedly with the question of John’s authority. John’s maverick enterprise of baptism for forgiveness was not technically wrong, but it was an affront. It claimed an authority to proclaim God’s forgiveness to the people. And forgiveness was the foundation of the renewal of God’s people in their preparation for the coming Messiah.

Such charismatic authority was outside the control of the order established by the Temple aristocracy. Power exercised in healing and exorcism, in prophetic words and actions as Jesus had done, created a problem about authority. Jesus and John are both charismatic figures outside the bounds of the Pharisaic and Temple understanding of authority.

Jesus’ question was a good one.

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

It was not a trick. It posed the great dilemma. Their first response was that if they said it was from God then they should have believed it and acted on it. Their next response was political. They had read the public mood, consulted the pollsters. Then hard question of truth then went out the window.

We see that happen all the time and not only in politics but in the church too. Jesus puts a seriously tough question to the leaders. How do you tell true and false prophets? They put it in the too hard basket. They were pragmatists. No tough questions for them. Jesus is a problem. Let's deal with Jesus. Don't ask the big questions, don't try and answer the big questions. They are too hard. Concentrate on the matter at hand. Jesus is a problem to our authority and hence our power. Theological niceties are not our problem.

So they answer, "We do not know?"

The leaders claimed authority to know God's will for the people. One would have thought the question about true and false prophets went to the heart of their ministry. But religious leaders like any other are always prone to put politics before the study of hard questions about truth.

So Jesus leaves the answer hanging. Make up your own minds is his approach. You have the all the information you need. Let your intellect and heart speak and not politics.

This is what Jesus points to but the leaders will not decide. Politics of power and identity blinds them. So He leaves them with a parable that is daylight clear. Yet it creates another problem.

## The authority to command obedience

28 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."<sup>29</sup> He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went.<sup>30</sup> The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

Obedience is a problem for God's people in every age. Church work can degenerate into little more than an exercise in personal power and politics, maintaining the institution. Someone has said that we Christians say we are sent to work in God's vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes we rearrange the stones along the path.

Who are the first and second sons? For Jesus' time the first son is the prostitutes and tax collectors and the second is the Jewish religious leadership. This is very confronting. Tax collectors and prostitutes are those both morally and politically abhorrent for Jesus' audience. And yet they go into God's empire of justice, mercy and right relations before those who have spent their lives in the pursuit of keeping God's people pure.

So here are some questions. In our time who is the first son? And who is the second? Who says that they obey Christ but refuse him access to the depths of soul and life, for whom nothing has, is or will ever change? Who continues to rearrange the stones along the path?

Who are the repentant, who so accept the authority of Christ that they change their minds and run with Christ's agenda for their lives? Who are the prostitutes and tax collectors of our day? Are we among them?

Who will commit themselves to God's will in Jesus? Accept his authority, even the authority of a cross?

But this encounter also raises an important issue about authority in the church. Christian leaders have no claim to authority or power on the basis of succession or status. Their claim to authority and therefore the right to exercise power and oversight in the Christian

community is their commitment to doing the will of God (7:21-23). The content of that is the pattern that Jesus set in the cross: It is the authority to serve so that people will be set free (20:20-28). They must renounce all other claims.

Their character is that of the beatitudes (5). They are seekers and lovers of mercy, peace, just and right relations, humility, truthfulness and purity of heart. These are they whose authority lies beyond themselves but works itself out in the life they live.

## **Conclusion**

There is no room for pretence or pretentiousness. The prostitutes and toll collectors, allowed themselves to become vulnerable, so moved by the word of mercy, peace and compassion that they let it address their deepest needs.

On the other hand were the religious leaders so defensive in protecting their system that they suppressed their inner cries, stopped their ears?

The danger is never passed for any one of us. Rejecting the authority of the Messiah Jesus to demand of us peace, justice, truthfulness and humility in our lives in the power of the Spirit is rejecting Christ no matter how religious we are.

Come let us return to the Lord, that we may live before him.