

POWER VS. AUTHORITY

TEXT: Matthew 21:23-32

Today's scripture lesson confronts us with a difficult issue. Jesus is challenged to authenticate his authority and, as Jesus is prone to do, in response he challenges the power of the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

The topic at hand today is *authority*. The religious authorities are challenging Jesus' right to teach and preach, particularly in the temple. And, again as Jesus so often does, he in turn reverses their challenge and ensnares them in their own trap.

Perhaps many of us have issues with authority. It's great when we have it, but it becomes a burden when it is exercised over us. *Who do you think you are? Who said you could do that? Hey, what's the big idea? Think you're a wise guy, huh? You need to show a picture ID. You're too big for your britches. You need taking down a peg.* Ever heard any of those? We question authority all the time. Sometimes viciously – our current politics will verify this. Sometimes violently – look at street brawls and drive-by shootings. Sometimes civilly - we do listen to doctors as they prescribe a regimen for us. Sometimes in heated arguments – Americans engage in these a lot: take fracking (please – don't) or the wanton taking of black lives all over our country.

We also honor authority. Until recently, we all saluted the flag. We rise when the judge enters the courtroom. For the most part, we stop at red lights. We accept the process of elections. And their results, even when they are a mess.

But Jesus, not only in Jerusalem, but nearly everywhere, was challenged often. *What authority do you have? Who are you to teach the way you do? Who are you to change the way we understand things? Who are you to alter what we know about good and evil?*

When it comes to questioning someone's authority, it is rarely just an issue of observation or objectivity. Rather, much like the story in today's reading from Matthew, there are usually ulterior motives in our inquiries. In the case of the chief priests and elders, their questioning of Jesus' authority comes from a desire to trap Jesus. BUT – trap him in what? What do they hope to accomplish in questioning Jesus' authority? We might ask ourselves the same question in similar circumstances.

It's interesting to note that this exchange takes place after Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey – yes, during Passion Week. He has cleansed the temple in a fit of pique. The Pharisees have already failed to come to terms with the way Jesus breaks through the purported boundaries separating obedient from sinful, clean from unclean. The chief priests and elders are struggling to come to terms with Jesus' public demonstration in the temple. Thus the question: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" The chief priests and elders are apparently expecting the name of a teacher; a human association that will help them better understand Jesus' actions. If you can identify someone's teacher, then you can better grasp what they're all about. More to the point, they are prepared to *counter* any and all claims to human authority with their own authority. At least as far as the local Jewish status quo is concerned, there is no claim to human authority that they cannot trump. After all, they are the temple leaders.

The possibility they are *not* prepared to entertain is the possibility of Jesus wielding an authority "from heaven". Jesus answered the question of authority with a question – he was noted for doing that too. Using a technique that goes back to the primal confrontation between Job and God, he challenged them concerning the authority of John the Baptist. By doing this, he caught them in a power struggle of their own making. If they answered that John's authority was authentic, Jesus could then ask why they had not listened to him. If they answered that his authority was groundless, they would invite the wrath of some people who *were* listening, who held John in high esteem as a prophet. So they decided to politically beg ignorance, and Jesus therefore dismissed their challenge. If they could not answer, he too would not.

Jesus does not produce an ID, a degree, or a doctrine on which he relies. We do that, defending him with our rationales that subtly reduce his stories to simpler terms, and we have also introduced an Authority, God the Father, white-haired and peeking through the clouds.

Jesus speaks instead about the Spirit as the Author of his Words. This is a very different kind of authority. An Author is a creator, an imaginative Shaper, a Maker of Wisdom.

An Author tells a story that expands the soul's universe, making room for something new to be born, increasing our diversity by dividing our harmony. An Authority draws us into conformity of thought, in which it is supposed that we are stronger, safer, and closer to God the Father.

Jesus tells stories of heaven and earth in which all things are possible, and nothing is impossible, and invites us to join in expanding the universe of wisdom. Authorities, who speak in doctrines and write creeds, reduce what is possible to one thing only. They crowd us together in herds, grazing in a well-known pasture, without thought of the necessary journey herds must often make to new, ungrazed fields.

The question of Jesus' authority does not merely encapsulate the Gospel of Matthew. It encapsulates the Christian gospel as a whole. For the church, then and now, everything depends upon the source of Jesus' authority. If it is ultimately "from humans" then Jesus is really no different than the next charismatic leader and the church will be forced to define itself only as a human institution among other human institutions. In other words, the church will be forced, like Jesus' opponents, to compete against perceived rivals, reducing its mission to the quest for power, even if it purports to use that power for doing "good" in the world.

If, however, Jesus' authority is "from heaven", then his messianic claim is valid and the church must stake a claim to a unique mission, a mission that relinquishes power in bringing Christ to the world, just as Christ relinquished power in bringing himself to the world. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus will tell his disciples (then and now) that: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

Jesus promised to his followers, those who were down and out, those who discover that the identity created by their past does not bring them life – represented here by the "tax collectors and prostitutes", two categories of people whose actions supposedly remove them beyond the pale of decent society – that they are open to the movement of God's spirit to hear, revive, restore, and make all things new. And Jesus makes this same promise to us. No matter what we have done, no matter what may have been done to us, the future is still open. Whatever hurt we may have experienced or done in the past is, ultimately, in the past. We do not have to allow it to determine or dominate our future. We are, finally, more than the sum total of all that has happened to us.

God is the author of all life, who regularly decides to invite a new relationship with us. God who will not count our past deeds, mistakes, griefs, or hurts against us. God who refuses to define us by what we do (or what has been done to us) but instead regards us always and only as God's beloved children. God who has given authority to his Son Jesus to bring God's kingdom to everyone on earth.

So I would invite each of us to consider to whom or what we have given authority in a way that does not serve life. Perhaps we need to delve into our past for those things we have done or things that have been done to us that we most regret or resent. Then I would invite each of us to let them go, to consign them to the past, to no longer give these past things authority over our lives and to walk into an open future defined not by regrets, hurts, and resentments, but instead to be defined by God's promise to be with us and for us forever.

This is the message of our gospel reading today. If we look for security in the world by holding vainly to power and position in either our civil or religious societies, we do great insult to the gift of eternal life that has been freely offered to us. When we diminish this gift by lowering Christian claims of Jesus' power and authority, causing them to rest among those religions whose adherents strive in works for power and position, we walk with deceit. We have our Christ whose authority comes from God, and to whom we owe our allegiance and love. Let us live with that authority as the cornerstone of our love and obedience. Amen.