

## Authority

Jesus has finally reached Jerusalem. And he has done so in a most dramatic way. He sent two disciples on ahead to retrieve a donkey he could ride, to fulfil the words of the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah. The delighted crowd filled the road with cloaks and branches. When Jesus reached the temple he drove out all the sellers and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. It must have been a very dramatic scene. It certainly was provocative. No sooner did Jesus show up the next day than he was confronted by the chief priests and elders of the people who demanded, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

If you're like me, you answer in your head, “His authority is from God, you guys. Why don't you get it?” and then move on. Today I want to stay with that question for a bit. It's a critical question for our time, because there's a lot of disagreement about who *does* have authority. Authority is not the same as power. Power can be used without authority. Authority is earned and granted. That's implicit in the question of the religious leaders. They seem unwilling to grant Jesus authority, and he knows it.

Who has authority? And from whom and whence does it come? In any society those are political questions as well as religious ones, which is clear from how the leaders engage Jesus. In our own time the decline of scientific authority, in particular, grieves me as someone who spent many years studying and teaching biology. It grieves me even more that some of the science-deniers are Christians. I think that comes from a misunderstanding of both the Bible and science, because they are *not* fundamentally in conflict. Nor do I believe that science has to be in conflict with politics.

One of the deeper parts of this encounter between Jesus and the temple leaders is the implication that knowing the source of authority is not independent of what one does with that knowledge. Jesus showed as much in his response. He asked, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” In their discussion the leaders show that their answer to that question affects what they must do with it. If they say the baptism came from God, they are open to challenge because they did not believe John; if they say of human origin, they face the wrath of the crowd. So they refuse to answer the question. Jesus, in turn, refuses to answer their question, because it is quite clear that they are not interested in truth. They are most interested in what will protect and advance themselves. Does that sound familiar?

Within this context, Jesus then tells a parable. It's a story of two children, probably sons – the Greek word is gender-neutral, but sons were more likely to work in the vineyard than daughters. Note that initially neither did the will of the father. One refused outright and the other said yes but didn't go. The first eventually changed his mind – an unusually strong Greek word is used here that implies repentance. He *did* go into the vineyard even after his initial refusal. So when Jesus asked which one did the will of his father, the answer was obvious. The first did. Jesus then berated the leaders for recognizing the truth of the parable but refusing to admit the truth of the kingdom of God staring them in the face.

We grant authority to those whom we believe to be true. We follow political leaders whom we believe to be fundamentally telling the truth. That is why whatever contradicts those positions we deem to be false. What sets Jesus apart, of course, is that Jesus isn't talking about political truth or authority. He represents ultimate truth coming from the authority of God. That's why he berates the religious leaders. They are not seeking God's truth. As the Gospel of John puts it, "they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 13:43 RSV).

St. Paul tells us something very important about the authority of Jesus in his letter to the church in Philippi. It came from humility, a humility far greater than is possible for humans. Jesus Christ, present in the fullness of God from all time, "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited," Paul tells us, "but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." That self-emptying of Christ, in Greek called *kenosis*, is the great mystery of the Incarnation. Not only that, but Christ further humbled himself to allow his own death on a cross. This is servant leadership at its best, the opposite of using power to make things happen. As a result God exalted Jesus so that every knee should bend at his name.

Where does all of this leave us? For myself as a religious leader, if I am to have authority I must to be careful to say "Yes" to God, or at least repent whenever I initially say "No" and do what God asks. But isn't that what Jesus expects of everyone? That's the point of the parable. It's also critical to realize that God's authority is ultimate, greater than any leader, greater even than allegiance to country. After all, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me" is the first of the Ten Commandments.

Following God is no easy task. The Twelve followed Jesus every day and they still stumbled, sometimes spectacularly. The miracle is that God forgave them, again and again. I take solace in that first child, the one who said No and did the work anyway. I also take solace in the grace and mercy of God. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and giver of life. Obey *that* authority over all others, and you will find the truth. Amen.

[Pentecost 17: Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32.]