

Sunday 27 September, 2020

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Dr Stephen Ames, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Matthew 21.21-32

Jesus is in the Temple teaching the people. The chief priests and elders come to him demanding an explanation of his actions most especially his stopping the operation of the Temple by overturning the tables of the money changers and seats of those who sold doves.

They ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" This is no neutral inquiry. These are the people who will soon have Jesus taken by force at night from the Garden of Gethsemane and tried before them. So here they are preparing the ground by asking about his authority.

Scholars tell us that grammatically the question is better translated "By what kind of authority are you doing these things?" The grammar is the same as when, for example, St Paul discusses the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:35, he says, people ask with what kind of body will they be raised.

Let's pause here for a moment. The Chief priests second question, "who gave you this authority?" had three possible answers. Jesus' authority either came from God or from Satan or from himself. He was accused of getting his power to cast out demons from being in league with the demons. He had been heard to present himself as if he was the source of his authority. You remember Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount. For example his saying to the people "You have heard from them of old that you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemies, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors." But even the man born blind knew that Jesus could do nothing like healing a man born blind were God not with him.

Ordinary people would have reckoned that his authority came from God.

But Jesus does not answer their question, for to answer them would be to submit to their terms, as if they had authority to question him. Rather Jesus asserts his authority to question them and to set his own conditions for giving them an answer.

Jesus does not answer their questions, at least not directly. He says that if they can answer his question, he will tell them by what authority he does these things. He asks whether the baptism of John was from heaven or of human origin.

The chief priests cannot answer. They have been wedged. If they say it was of God, then Jesus will ask why they did not believe John. If they say of human origin, then they fear the crowd, who are standing around them, for all regarded John as a prophet, having gone to be baptized by him in the Jordan river. The chief priests say they cannot tell, and so Jesus says he will not answer their question, though indirectly he has answered.

Let's pause again to consider what we might take from the story so far. What about this question, "As followers of Jesus, aiming to become like him, should we expect to be led by the Spirit to do things that would make people ask us, 'by what authority are you doing that?'"

Another way of asking that question is to draw on the Prayer Book. Recall that after communion the Prayer Book directs the priest to use a prayer that says, "*And we humbly beseech you heavenly Father so to assist us with your grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as you have prepared for us to walk in, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

Would any of those good works that the Father has prepared for us to walk in make people ask us, 'by what authority are you doing these things?'

Some of you might be saying to yourselves, 'Oh no, he wants us out on the street, with banners.' No, but now that you mention it what about the next time when the streets are full of young people demonstrating for serious action on climate change, will we be out there with them, demonstrating our care for them and the precarious future that they are facing and which is

already arriving. And imagine someone from the crowd seeing our banner, said to us, “what are you church people doing here?” What would be your answer?

Let me repeat, “Would any of those good works that the Father has prepared for us to walk in make people ask us, ‘by what authority are you doing these things?’”

I think the Dean’s sermon a couple of weeks ago pointed to one possible answer. He noted that our banner on welcoming refugees had attracted a lot of positive attention but he lamented that it had not led to any political change. I agree with the Dean and part of the reason we did not pursue the matter further was that we were all incredibly pleased with the positive reaction. What would it mean to take the matter further? I am sure the Dean was not thinking of any party-political change, but a change in the bi-partisan stance enforcing indefinite detention of people who came to Australia by boat and who were found to be refugees. I don’t know how we might have acted for a change in the bi-partisan view. That calls for some discernment. I am sure if we really did take some action people would say to us, “By what right or by what authority are you doing this?” They might even add, “the church and state are supposed to be separate.” What would we say to them?

Let me repeat, “Would any of those good works that the Father has prepared for us to walk in make people ask us, ‘by what authority are you doing these things?’”

I imagine some people hearing this might be saying, “Stephen that is all well and good, but my daily life doesn’t connect with any of that big picture stuff, how does this apply to me?”

Firstly, I want to say that many of the big picture issues of our life and times bear on all of us. But perhaps we don’t see where. If so, I suggest using this prayer.

Living God please show me any of those good works that you have prepared for me to walk in that are presently hidden from me, that are in my blind spot. I am willing to follow what ever you open up to me.

So, you say that prayer and what do you do next? You say that prayer and you pay attention; you pay attention to whatever is coming to you from without and whatever is rising up from within. And I predict something will claim your attention and you will be drawn to act on it. After a little thought if it still seems good you act on it. Having acted on it we each reflect on what happened and learn from it. In this way we each learn to distinguish between what gains our attention coming from God and what gains our attention coming from something other than God.

Now before I conclude I want to return to the scholars who say that the chief priests asked Jesus two questions. By what kind of authority do you do these things and who gave you this authority? We know Jesus' answer to the second question. It comes from God not from men.

Does that also answer the first question? Does it tell us what kind of authority Jesus has? No, it will depend on what we believe about God. For example, if we think of God in terms of earthly rulers then that will give us one idea of the kind of authority God is supposed to have. And if so, would it agree with Jesus? Would it tell us the kind of authority Jesus has? The answer in all four Gospels is a resounding NO.

Jesus warns the disciples that in the world the kings, the great men, are tyrants, lording it over the people, but it will not be so among you. Who ever wishes to be great among you will be your servant and who ever wants to be first, must be your slave.

Why would God be identified with service to others? Because service to others depends on discerning what is astray, what is out of kilter, what is breaking down and what will bring well-being for the person or group or situation being served. That is, it depends on the servant knowing what is good and what is true, and sometimes these may initially be hidden from those who are being served. Service actually given, also depends on generosity of spirit, a costly generosity. All these qualities can be shown to trace their roots back to God.

This is why people who truly serve others gain our respect and trust, why they carry authority, whatever their official position may be. We think of those on the front-line service risking exposure to coronavirus to help keep us all safe. That is why late Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Supreme

Court Justice is so revered in the U.S. For the same reason many of the leaders of our institutions have lost credibility and authority, whether in politics or finance or in business or mining, or in the churches.

In all this Jesus is the exemplar, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith for he is the one who came not to be served but serve and give his life as a ransom for many

So, to conclude, the scholars make an important point when they tell us that the chief priests' first question to Jesus is about the kind of the authority that Jesus has. And as we pay attention to the Gospels, we realise that the kind of authority Jesus has is distinctive. It is the authority from God that comes from truly serving others.

Is this all that is distinctive about Jesus' authority? No, there is more, and here is the clue, to encourage you to take hold of it. The Latin root of the word 'authority' is the same as the word 'author'. Some of you will remember a prayer that addressed God as the author and giver of life. God has authority, because God is the author and giver of life and its most passionate servant to bring it to perfection through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be all praise, glory and honour.