

## Trinity 16 2017 Authority and truth

Imagine the frustration those priests and elders must have felt! This Jesus was always catching them in their own words, making them look foolish in the eyes of the people. No matter how carefully they worded their questions, he always escaped their traps. No matter how much time they spent looking for an excuse to arrest him, he could slip through their fingers in an instant, with just a word or two. It was infuriating! And it was frightening. The leaders who had ruled the Jerusalem Temple for so long enjoyed their power. They liked the respect shown to them in the streets and the markets. They loved being the ones in authority. And here was this unschooled carpenter, teaching right under their noses, sounding like he knew God more intimately than any human possibly could. This Jesus could easily turn the people away from the Temple, away from the control of the high priests and the scribes. He taught with authority, but who had authorized him? Certainly not the Temple leaders. Just who did he think he was?

Authority and obedience have been tied together since Jesus began his ministry, and Jesus will connect them again after his resurrection, when he gives his disciples the Great Commission, telling them, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”* (28:18-19).

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians that we heard earlier, he quotes an early hymn of the church that describes Christ’s authority perfectly:

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:5-11)

Christ received his authority directly from God, and in obedience he humbled himself. Christ’s authority also comes from those who call him Lord, who seek to do his will.

Which brings us back to the parable Jesus uses to teach this lesson on authority. As he describes two sons, who are each given the same direction to go work in

their father's vineyard, the connection between authority and obedience becomes clear. One says he will go, and doesn't, while the other refuses, but then changes his mind, and does what he was told to do. "Which did the will of his Father?" Jesus asks. The Temple leaders relax a bit. This isn't a trick question, after all. The answer is obvious. The one who went to work, even after he said he would not. Then Jesus looks at these priests and elders, and they suddenly know they've been had once again.

Let us put this parable into a time context because that makes it easier to understand. This was just after the first Palm Sunday during the first Holy Week, as we would describe it. We know that the High priests, the Temple priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians and the Zealots were plotting against him. It was a very unholy and unlikely bunch – a bit like Jeremy Corbin and Theresa May coming together with a joint agreed policy on the de-nationalisation of the railways and state funding for private education!

What was it about the of authority of Jesus that troubled hem most?

The climax is now approaching Jesus is now in Jerusalem, having made his triumphal entry into the city with the huge acclaim of the crowds. His popularity has never been higher- he is the current mega star! He has already irritated the authorities by the cleansing of the Temple when he had called them a bunch of thieves and had directly challenged their corruption and deceit. Jesus has challenged their authority so their response is to challenge his but their challenge and therefore their authority is undermined by their unwillingness to answer the questions he puts to them about the baptism of John.

*"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?'"<sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."<sup>27</sup> 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."*

They do not have the courage of their convictions to come down on one side or the other. The impression is that they know what the answer ought to be, but they know that in giving it they would condemn themselves out of their own mouths and therefore lose face yet again.

What do they do? What is their solution?

They chose to save face but lost all credibility by saying that they do not know. The parable that Jesus tells them emphasises what has just been brought home

to them- that actions speak louder than words and that simply knowing what is right is no substitute for actually doing what is right and doing God's will.

From an early age we are taught, hopefully, to understand the difference between right and wrong. Sadly, we often blur truth for expediency and twist the facts to suit our desired opinion just like the Temple clergy of Jesus' day. Another lesson we learn is that actions speak louder than words. Perhaps these words from the poem, the Will of God, by Rebekah Nolt, sums it up.

*The will of God will never take you,  
Where the grace of God cannot keep you,  
Where the arms of God cannot support you,  
Where the riches of God cannot supply your needs,  
Where the power of God cannot endow you.*

*The will of God will never take you,  
Where the spirit of God cannot work through you,  
Where the wisdom of God cannot teach you,  
Where the army of God cannot protect you,  
Where the hands of God cannot mold you.*

*The will of God will never take you,  
Where the love of God cannot enfold you,  
Where the mercies of God cannot sustain you,  
Where the peace of God cannot calm your fears,  
Where the authority of God cannot overrule for you.*

*The will of God will never take you,  
Where the comfort of God cannot dry your tears,  
Where the Word of God cannot feed you,  
Where the miracles of God cannot be done for you,  
Where the omnipresence of God cannot find you.*

Amen.

