

A New Humility ...

... inspired by the Authority of Jesus

A sermon given on the Sixteenth Sunday of Trinity, 27th September 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Minster.

Matthew 21:23-32

[The microphone was not working to begin with; we pick up the sound about 20 seconds in]

Are you supposed to always respect authority figures? Do you always have to keep on the right side of your teachers when you were at school? [I'll stop shouting] Do you always accept the referee's decision even when it's questionable? Or, are you someone who's naturally suspicious of authority figures? Do you refuse to be browbeaten by minor officials and ignore those road markings that try and send you all the way round the edge of the empty car park at the supermarket?

Authority, of course, can easily become oppressive. In the past, Kings claimed to be backed up by the authority of God, the divine right of kings. So disobedience to the king was not only treasonable, it was also blasphemous. And too often the church has claimed to speak with the authority of God in ways which were self-serving. So nowadays, we are no longer inclined to be quite so deferential just because someone is wearing a uniform or a dog collar. But the question of authority won't go away: if final authority doesn't lie with God or the Crown, perhaps it lies in the law? But our own government has just passed a bill making the keeping of an international law apparently optional. And if the rule of law is what distinguishes us from Vladimir Putin's Russia, then it seems that distinction is slowly being eroded. Some would say, alternatively, that in a democracy, authority ultimately rests with the people: but all the signs are that if Donald Trump loses the presidential election in November, he's not going to go quietly, whatever the people say.

So if authority doesn't lie in the end with God or the crown or the law or the people, where does it lie? Perhaps we're reaching the point where we won't accept any authority outside of ourselves. Everything becomes a matter of personal preference and subjective opinion. We hear nowadays how the Internet is a great source of democracy, where every opinion is equally valid, whether it's the opinion of the flat earth society or of NASA; they carry equal weight. And when we're asked to accept anyone else's verdict, all too often the challenge comes back, "Who says?"

Well, I think something like that is happening in this morning's gospel reading, but it's the other way round. Jesus is healing people, forgiving sins, casting out demons and challenging the authority of the temple system. And the authority figures, the chief priests and the elders who are feeling threatened by all that Jesus is doing, are asking, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you permission? Who appointed you?' Jesus responds by asking them about the authority of John the Baptist, because John didn't have an official role and nobody had given him permission to baptise, but thousands of people had recognised the authority of his ministry and had responded by going out into the wilderness to be baptised by him.

And that surely gives us a clue to the answer to this vexed question of authority: true authority doesn't come from having a role or having a place in the hierarchy. Authority is inherent in a person acting with integrity. John the Baptist had authority because in calling out the powerful and corrupt, he was acting in accordance with God's justice and truth. He wasn't enforcing a law. He was just doing what was right. And Jesus's authority is of the same kind: people listen to him not because he has passed exams and holds qualifications, not because he's been given an official role and title and not because he has the police to back him up, but because what he's doing is setting people free from things that oppress them, whether it's disease or hunger or unclean spirits or past failures or an unjust religious system. His actions are righteous and people instinctively recognise that. And that, I think, is why people are still attracted to Jesus today, even if they don't see anything very attractive in the church. People can see that Jesus has an authority that is life-giving, flowing from the resurrection itself, even if sometimes the church has tried to usurp that authority and use it to control people instead of setting them free.

And I think people respond to that authority, the authority of Jesus, a bit like the way they respond to the authority of a parent: when children obey their parents, it's not usually because there is a law being imposed and not normally, at least in a healthy family, because there's a threat of violence, but because they instinctively recognise that a parent has responsibility for their children. And parents have an innate authority when they are acting in children's best interests.

So when Jesus tells the story of two sons asked by their father to work in the vineyard and one of them says he will but actually doesn't, and the other one says he won't but then changes his mind and does, what we're seeing are two different responses to authority. The second son thinks it's all about outward respect for authority and that if you say you'll

obey, it doesn't necessarily mean you have to do anything different. But the other son changes his mind: at first, he resists his father's authority, but then he recognises it and responds to it, not because he's forced to, but because he recognises his father has the right to ask and that such authority shouldn't be ignored. And it may not have been easy for him to have had second thoughts like that and to admit that his first response might not have been the right one. It shows a certain amount of humility.

All of us are subject to various kinds of authority: we're subject to the law even if we don't like it, and even if we don't like the people making the laws; we tend to respect the authority of the truth where it is clear and unambiguous; I have quite a healthy respect for the law of gravity because experience suggests you ignore it at your peril. But there is also this personal authority, the kind of authority Jesus was so full of. It's an authority which isn't always obvious or easy to define, and as a result, it's possible to ignore it, like that second son in the story; to say, 'I agree' without actually doing anything about it. And often the reason we don't respond to that kind of authority is because we are expected to change our minds and often we find that inconvenient. We don't like admitting that we too, might have been wrong. Truth that isn't obvious and that creeps up on you slowly requires you to change your mind, to have a due humility, like the first son changed his mind and decided that, after all, he would go and work in the vineyard. So I wonder, when was the last time you changed your mind in response to the authority of Jesus? If you can't think of a time and even if you can't think of a fairly recent example, then it may be we have to ask ourselves whether we are really open to the authority of Jesus, whatever we say. That authority, which will take hold and influence us as we grow in faith and trust; that authority that takes hold of us as our relationship with Jesus deepens and as we open our lives up to his influence.

There is no doubt that the authority we are under will shape our lives. The question is, which authority and whose authority is really shaping yours?

Reading Text

Matthew 21:23-32

²³ Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” ²⁴ Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’” ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’” ²⁹ “‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. ³¹ “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.