

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

Pentecost 17 Year A (*holiday edition*)

Ex. 17:1-7; Ps. 78:1-4,12-16; Phil. 2:1-13; Mt. 21:23-32

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Many people today have an unusual amount of difficulty accepting those in authority. We live in a society where the rights of the individual to do what he or she wants, often seems to supersede the rights of those in positions of authority. Certainly, we would not deny that corrupt authority needs to be challenged. But in order for authority to be respected, we want to know the origin of that authority. When authority has a legitimate origin, we are far more likely to respect it and obey it.

(e.g. a policeman pulling you over for a traffic offence)

When we come, however, to the authority of Jesus, such criticisms of legitimacy shouldn't need to concern us, for we all know that Jesus' authority is derived from God. Or do we? If we genuinely believe in the authority of Jesus, then such a confession has major repercussions for our Christian lives and we need to understand its implications.

The passage that is before us this morning from Matthew's account of the gospel, illustrates an important aspect of our Christian faith—that of recognising the authority of Jesus Christ and obeying his teaching. The same dangers that threatened the Pharisees also threaten Christians today. It's one thing to give God lip service, it is another to live in accordance to his will and in obedience to Christ's teaching. It's one thing to be seen to attend church and do all the "right" religious things, it's quite another to exercise the power of Christ in your day to day lives. As we study the passage before us, we discover that there are two aspects relating to the recognition of Jesus authority that Christians everywhere need to be aware. The first is that...

I. RECOGNITION OF JESUS' AUTHORITY CALLS FOR DECISION.

The day after Jesus cleansed the Temple of all the traders and money changers, he returned to teach. It was during this time, that the religious leaders came to him with a question. On one level, one might be tempted to think that their question was quite legitimate. After all, Jesus has done a few controversial things—healed the sick, taught convincingly about the kingdom of heaven and upset a lot of traders in the Temple—so don't you think it's legitimate for them to ask him by what authority he is doing this? What a perfectly natural question.

Unfortunately, their question hid a much more sinister motive. Throughout the gospel we have seen a growing unwillingness of the religious leadership of the Jews to approve Jesus and his claims, although these have often been validated before them, both in his teaching

and his actions. Consequently, this passage records a considerable controversy between them which intensifies, culminating in Jesus' crucifixion.

The question posed by the religious leaders, then, was not the result of a genuine searching for truth. Instead, it was designed as a trap. If Jesus said straight out that his authority was from God they would be able to denounce him as a heretic and would then have substantial reason to get rid of him. But being wise to their motives, Jesus asks them a question—"I'll answer your question, if you answer mine." And so he asks them about the authority John the Baptist. "Where did John get his authority, from God or from people?"

You see, it too was a trick question, and they knew it. If they answered, "From God", then Jesus would say, "Then why didn't you obey him, repent of your sins and be baptised." But if they answered, "From people," then they risked the wrath of the crowd, for the general population believed that John was indeed a messenger from God. They had been caught in their own trap, because if they recognised John's authority, they also had to recognise Jesus' authority, for John pointed directly to Jesus. To accept John was to accept Jesus, to reject John was to reject Jesus. And so, to protect themselves, they responded, "We don't know."

When a person is honestly searching for the ultimate truth of Jesus, the response, "I don't know," is a legitimate answer. We don't have all the answers and should never claim that we do. There is much in the Christian faith that we do not know. The more I study the Bible and pursue theological insight, the more I realise just how much I really don't know. There is a wealth of spiritual knowledge that neither you nor I will ever be able to understand. There are great mysteries of God that will never be resolved.

The fact that we cannot know all there is to know about Jesus Christ merely points to the fragmentary nature of human knowledge. So, in a very real sense, the answer, "I don't know" is often a perfectly legitimate answer.

However, the response, "I don't know", still cannot be used to avoid a decision.

Now, I'm not talking about the concept that some have, of making a decision for Christ—that concept has enough difficulties of its own. I'm talking about making a decision to recognise Christ's authority and so act accordingly.

The question posed by the religious leaders in relation to Jesus' authority, was merely a smoke screen, because they had already rejected both John and Jesus. When Jesus asked them the counter question, about John's authority they were not willing to declare themselves in front of the crowd. This highlighted their hypocrisy.

Those who are openly and honestly searching for truth, have nothing to hide, when they say, "I don't know." But those who say, "I don't know," to avoid making a decisive stand, say it out of an attitude of hypocrisy—a desire to hide their true thoughts.

Honest searching and struggling for truth must finally decide, even if, in some sense, we still do not fully and finally "know." There comes a point where a decision must be made in regard to Jesus' authority. And when that decision is made, action must follow.

Therefore...

II. RECOGNITION OF JESUS' AUTHORITY CALLS FOR ACTION.

Action must follow decision. How should we respond to the question of Jesus' authority? What are the implications of recognising the authority of Jesus? What is our responsibility? In the following parable that Jesus tells of the two sons, Jesus highlights both the responsibility of those who recognise the authority of Jesus and the hypocrisy of those who do not.

With the first question that Jesus asked, the religious leaders declined to give a decisive answer. So, in the context of a parable, he asked them another question, which they should have had no difficulty in answering. Jesus follows the parable by asking the question: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" "The first," they answered. The answer was so obvious, that they could not fail to get it right.

When the religious leaders avoided the first question, with the lame answer, "We don't know," they stood condemned. When they properly answered the second question, they condemned themselves. The two questions relate to the same issue. The first son, although at first unwilling to obey, finally does the will of his father. The second son, although outwardly agreeing to obey his father, does not in actuality do it.

Religious practice, therefore, does not guarantee spiritual integrity. The Pharisees had everything going for them. They meticulously upheld the tradition of the Jewish religion. They studied and interpreted the Law of God for the people. They were given the responsibility of leading their nation in the worship of God and shepherding God's flock. Their very lives attested to their dedication of obedience to the will of God. Yet, they failed miserably in the exercising of their duties and because of it, stood condemned.

It's very easy to say, "Yes, yes," to God, and yet live a life of hypocrisy. It's very easy to make all the right noises and do all the right outward actions. But it's quite another thing to live an authentic Christian life in obedience to the will of God, under the authority of Christ.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees had both originally said “yes” to the prophetic message of God through the prophets of the Old Testament and through John, but in the end they had rejected it.

On the other hand, those who, by their actions, had been saying no to God’s will, as revealed in the Law, changed their minds and accepted Christ. It was the tax collectors and prostitutes, the so-called low-life of society who were crowding into God’s kingdom because they had repented and believed in John’s teaching and as a consequence accepted the authority of Christ and followed his teaching.

Therefore, it is those who recognise the authority of Christ and obey his message who finally receive the promise of the kingdom. It is not merely those who look or act as though they do. This has very serious implications for the lives that we live as Christians. We are on trial, both by the community and by the Word of God. The Jewish religious leaders were judged and were found wanting. We too are exposed to the same condemnation if we do not act out our Christian confession with humility and integrity:

CONCLUSION

The church is God’s prophetic voice in the midst of a corrupt and degenerating world. We, as members of that church, have the responsibility to witness to the authority of Christ in every area of our lives. How we live our lives, outside of the church building, determines how others perceive the kind of God we represent. We only fool ourselves, as did the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, if we think that people cannot see through any hypocrisy that we may display. Our authenticity, then, puts Christ’s authority and consequently his message of salvation, on the line.

It’s also true that we can never pre-determine those who will finally accept Christ’s authority and receive his message of salvation. We do well to remember Jesus’ parable of the two sons and strive always to live as obedient children of a loving Father. A Father who guides us by his grace, forgives us when we make mistakes and gives us his Holy Spirit to live in us.

From Jude, verses 24 and 25:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.