

Authority and Obedience

Today we begin a continuous reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Over the course of the next few weeks, we will hear of exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees as well as some parables from Jesus. To help better understand today's Gospel text as well as the next 3 Gospel readings, we must first consider the context in which we find these texts.

The setting for this text is what we now call Holy Week. It is the day after Jesus had triumphantly entered Jerusalem while riding a donkey. The shouting of the crowds drew the attention of the religious leaders in the city and they began trying to control the crowds so that the Romans would not be alarmed and bring down the might of the Roman army onto the citizens and all those who had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. The religious leaders wanted to show Pilate and the Romans that they could control the unrest of the people. On the other hand, the religious authorities were hoping and expecting a Messiah to come from God who would deliver them out from under Roman domination. It is on this edge of balance where the religious authorities find themselves. Therefore, they had to make sure that anyone who comes into their capital city and claims to be this Messiah must either prove it or go away. After Jesus' entry into the city, He cleansed the Temple of the money changers and merchants. After this display of anger, Jesus left the city and returned the next day and began teaching.

It is referencing these events of cleansing the Temple and even the triumphal entry which the authorities were questioning Jesus. They are basically asking Jesus, "Who died and made you the boss?" In asking by what authority and who gave it to you, the chief priests want to know how Jesus justifies what He was doing. Much like a job interviewer asking a job applicant where did they go to school and their experience.

They want to make sure that Jesus had the 'right' training and credentials to ensure that Jesus was following orthodoxy and not acting out on His own in a heretical fashion. In reply, Jesus politely gives the typical Jewish response by asking a question of His own. The way Jesus' question was phrased put the chief priests and elders into a box. Notice that Jesus did not ask about the source of John the Baptist's authority but rather what John the Baptist did. The chief priests saw the person as being the authority whereas Jesus saw the act as being authoritative.

This still does not totally resolve the issue of the source of authority. How do we know if it is something that comes from God or simply of human origin. If it is from human origin, was it conferred upon a person or did that person just declare it themselves and grasp that mantle of authority? To find the answer to this is to see where the person points. If they acknowledge and point to God as the source of their authority and say that they are following God's direction, then they probably received their authority from God. If, however, they only point to themselves as the only authority needed, then this authority is probably of human origin.

In looking at the parable that Jesus told, the parable of the sons, Jesus changes the argument away from authority to one of obedience. Jesus does not tell the chief priests if they are right or not in their answer that the first son, the one who said no but then still went and did as his father asked, was the one who did the will of the father. Instead, Jesus used their answer to show how it is more important to have a change of heart from one of doing things out of selfish desires to doing things because someone greater, that is God, wants us to do them. This change of heart follows along with the petition from the Lord's prayer of asking God for 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' Jesus even tells us that we do have a chance to change our minds, to change our hearts when we do see the authority of God the Father.

Jesus did not tell them if their answer was correct, because in actuality, it was not correct. The question asked through the parable was actually a trick question of sorts. Neither son was obedient to their father. True obedience was exhibited by Jesus just a few days later when Jesus did the will of the Father and went to the cross and died. This true obedience was referred to by Paul in his letter to the Philippians with the inclusion of the Christ Hymn in the second reading this morning. Paul urges us to be of the mind of Jesus, obediently following the will of God. To say we will go and then actually go. That is what Jesus wants, that is what God wants, this is what we should want as well.

But we cannot stop at the cross and say that is all we need to do is to follow God's will. We need to recognize that it is the grace of God which is seen in the empty cross & empty grave that ultimately saves us. Not a ledger that keeps track of times obeyed and times not obeyed, but the love shown to us by God for not remembering those wrongs. The question for us becomes how will we respond to this kind of love?

A couple of final thoughts about authority. Jesus is portrayed in Matthew's Gospel as having authority. Jesus taught with authority and acted that way. How much proof would the religious authorities want and what kind of proof would be acceptable? It is the same way with us. When someone comes along and tells us something a little different, something that makes us uneasy; we want to know "who died and made them the boss?" and we look at them with suspicion wondering from where their authority comes that lets them talk like that. We are quick to distance ourselves from them, setting up an 'us vs. them' scenario. We try to isolate them, hoping that fewer and fewer people will listen to them.

Once authority is established, the question becomes how we react to it. Do we blindly follow it, believing that those with it know what they are doing; believing that everything they say is true? Or do we question it; make certain that the claims that are

being made are true? There are right ways and wrong ways to question authority. The right way keeps the focus on the issue and looks for a solution. Wrong ways tend to deflect attention away from the issue onto something secondary. Misuse of authority, regardless of the source and the type it is only leads down the road to fear of the 'other' and divisiveness.

We also need to remember that we have authority - the authority to question the status quo, the plans of those in power. We see this authority to question in Scripture, with Abraham questioning God about destroying Sodom & Gomorrah; Moses talking with God about destroying the Israelites at Mount Sinai; even Jesus questioned the authorities about Sabbath traditions as well as other traditions. Even in the secular world, we need to remember that this country was founded on questioning authority. The founding fathers saw this authority to be so important that they wrote it into the Declaration of Independence; stating that we have not just a right, but also a duty to question authority when it is abused. But we must not abuse our authority, thinking that any authority other than our own is wrong.

May we use the authority that God has given us in constructive ways, ways that result in providing comfort to those who are afflicted, ways of following Jesus that result in spreading the Good News about the Kingdom of God.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/h0qIxxNzo-0>

Service: <https://youtu.be/-T3LNynEDKU>