

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Proper 21 A

September 27th, 2020

Matthew 21.23-32

The authority of Jesus

Jesus begins his ministry, and what's the first sign of it? Is it his healings? Is it raising people from the dead? Is it the content his new teaching?

No – all these things are to come. But in each of the Gospels in a different way we're made to know that the first sign that Jesus had come into his ministry was that he acted and spoke with *authority*. He calls fishermen to follow him, and they just drop everything and go; he looks into people's eyes and says, 'I know you – your name is such and such'. And as he names them, they feel compelled by him. He says, 'the kingdom of God has come near', and people believe him on no more evidence than the words themselves.

And later, as his ministry develops, that note of authority is there in everything he does. He teaches, and the people say, 'he teaches as one having authority'. He casts out demons, with the untroubled air of one who has power of command in the psychic sphere. He acts as though he has the authority to forgive sins and heals physical ills to vindicate this. His whole ministry is shot through with authority.

The authority of Jesus – either you 'get it', or you don't. He doesn't wear a badge or a pass round his neck to prove it. He hasn't got a title or letters after his name to demand respect. He doesn't wear special clothes, and nobody (human) has given him an official position. He just has authority.

This week we've seen our national leaders struggling to exert authority in this unique and totally unexpected situation we find ourselves in. And some of the most vociferous questioning of increased coronavirus restrictions comes from within the ranks of the governing party itself. But being under question doesn't mean you're wrong.

Jesus' authority was questioned, we know that's where our Gospel-reading came in on the story. He was presenting an authority alternative to that of the given-order – and the given-order was fighting back against this upstart, as they saw him. And though there may not have been the news media in those days, constantly reporting on the tos and fros of the population's sympathy and respect, there was almost certainly quite an effective rumour mill, to do its bit in putting one side up, and pulling the other down.

Jesus' authority, though it seemed compelling to so many, was by no means unquestioned. You either 'got it' or you didn't. It was an inward thing. And people's response to it could change. The crowds which once seemed so transfixed could melt away or turn against him. People like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who had sat on the fence at first, could throw caution to the winds for the sake of Jesus at the last.

If we call ourselves Christians, I take it that means that something inside us responds to the authority of Jesus when we meet him – in the first place springing out of the pages of the Gospel, but also in

the community which is called by his name – the church. The authority of his presence, the authority of his words, the authority of his love. They grasp us and compel our loyalty. This is why our current baptism service boldly has candidates saying, 'I submit to Christ'. Submission – a most unfashionable word: there's a response to authority for you! But to be real submission to Christ, our response should be based not so much on outward arguments for believing, as on the inward testimony we feel that in Jesus, authority is truly authentic.

I am more and more convinced that if we want to influence other people to share our faith, the best thing we can do is to encourage them to meet Jesus for themselves, especially in the pages of the Gospels. Of course, there's a lot in the Gospels which seems inexplicable when people don't know a bit of the background. There must be much which is baffling, if you're not used to thinking in religious categories at all. And yet I believe that Jesus can still speak out of those stories and that teaching; his authority can leap off the page and be compelling to even the most surprising of people. Arguing endlessly about the existence of God, or trying to

justify the suffering of the world, or the failings of the church in the light of such a belief, is probably much less use than simply giving witness that it's the Jesus of the Gospel who has authority for us. And he can have authority which makes sense for others, too. Give someone you're arguing with a Gospel to read, and let it do its own work.

Of course, not everyone will respond to Christ's authority, even given the chance. They didn't in the days of his ministry, either. And some may not respond at once who will respond later, like the first son in today's parable. St Paul was one in whom the story of Jesus, and his presence in his followers, took time to work its transformation. But when that transformation came, it was sudden and very complete. You may point someone to the person of Jesus, and find it cuts no ice with them – but years later, what effect it has had! An extraordinary worker in the vineyard may owe his or her obedience to the fact that you were a signpost pointing to Jesus. You pointed, and then you prayed.

The important thing is that we shouldn't be like the second son of the parable – saying that our Lord has

authority for us, but in fact denying that with our lives. We seasoned churchgoers need to return again and again to the person of Jesus and listen to him with fresh ears each time. The Gospel is read in church each Sunday. We may read it at home or at work – on-line even. Or in a study group. The important thing is that it should be part of our lives, and not just something we give a weekly nod to.

I think we all know that our faith is expressed in repeated repentance. This means turning and returning to the source for forgiveness, restoration, and redirection.

We may have many questions to ask him about the world - its fairness or unfairness, and why things are as they are. But before we let the clamour of our questions arise, we must make sure that we can hear Jesus' authoritative command to us – 'follow me!' It requires a response every day.