

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

Luke 20:1-8

Our reading today is concerned with the authority of Jesus to teach and say the things that he did and above all to act as he did. So as we study this passage together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church Bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be projected on the screen.

To understand the background to our reading today we really need to look at the last two verses of chapter 19:

“Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.” (Luke 19:47-48 NIV)

Our reading today is the first episode of Jesus's teaching in the temple to be described by Luke and in the context of the two verses from chapter 19 we've just read it has an ominous ring to it. Jesus is present in the temple to proclaim “good news” to the people, but the Jerusalem leadership interrupts him with hostile intentions, they're planning to kill him. They couldn't care less about Jesus' message of salvation they just want to be rid of him. It's an appropriate reading for the beginning of Lent, these hostile intentions of the Jewish leadership will result in Jesus's crucifixion on Good Friday. In listing the three leadership groups Luke makes it clear that the Jews challenging Jesus were an official delegation representing the Sanhedrin. The strategy of these leaders is quite clear. Accosting Jesus before the people, they're seeking to portray him as an outsider, as a person not to be held in high regard or trusted. They're trying to shame him publicly by casting doubt on his authority to teach as he did. But Jesus turns the tables on the Jerusalem leadership by turning the idea of authorisation they've introduced against them and showing that they don't have legitimate authority whilst presenting himself as *the* authoritative teacher.

Luke sets the scene for the confrontation in verse 1 of our reading: “One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him.” (verse 1)

So Jesus has reclaimed the temple for its proper use as a centre of instruction and revelation about God’s salvation. But, standing in opposition to him, are the chief priests, legal experts, and elders, representative of the Jewish leadership, whose collective authority originates in the purity of their birthright (in the case of the priests), in their education (in the case of the scribes), and in their good fortune in having been born into Jerusalem families of high status. Indeed, by the way he’s staged this dispute, Luke is reminding us of the leaders’ advantage in the challenge and riposte that constitutes this scene. Within the temple the leadership serves and represents their authority must have seemed almost irrefutable. But it wasn’t irrefutable as far as Jesus was concerned for he was no ordinary man and this moment had been foreshadowed whilst he was still a boy (Luke 2:41-51).

Jesus isn’t intimidated by his surroundings, the temple is his Father’s house (Luke 2:49) and is where he has chosen to unveil God’s plan and the good news of the kingdom of God that is breaking in and the presence of redemption for the marginal people of that society – even though some of these marginal people such as lepers would have been excluded from the temple courts due to their ritual uncleanness. These recipients of Jesus’s message were far removed from the chief priests, legal experts and elders who put a question to Jesus in verse 2: “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,” they said. “Who gave you this authority?” (verse 2)

The Jewish leadership don’t really want an answer to their question, they think they already have all the answers. The question these leaders put to Jesus indicates not only a questioning of Jesus’s authority, but a war of worlds – fundamentally different visions of God’s purpose, the character of leadership, and the nature of Israel’s redemption. This is made especially relevant coming as it does on the heels of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple (Luke 19:45-46). Luke’s readers are already well aware of Jesus’s authority (Luke 4:32, 36;

5:24) based on his divine sonship and grounded in his rooting in the Holy Spirit. The people in the temple are also aware of Jesus's authority for they recently welcomed him into Jerusalem as a king (Luke 19:29-40).

Although the question posed by the Jewish leadership was open ended, Jesus narrows the choices to two alternatives – divine origin or human origin. Look at verses 3-6:

“He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men', all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet."” (verses 3-6)

This was a very relevant question because John's ministry and Jesus's ministry were totally interlinked. John's ministry was of fundamental importance. J C Ryle says:

“It may reasonably be doubted whether the importance of John the Baptist's ministry is generally understood by Christians. The brightness of our Lord's history overshadows the history of His forerunner, and the result is that John's baptism and preaching do not receive the attention which they deserve. Yet it should never be forgotten, that the ministry of the Baptist was the only New Testament ministry foretold in the Old Testament, excepting that of Christ. It was a ministry which produced an immense effect on the Jewish mind, and aroused the expectation of Israel from one end of Palestine to the other. Above all, it was a ministry which made the Jews without excuse in their rejection of Christ, when Christ appeared. They could not say that they were taken by surprise when our Lord began to preach. Their minds had been thoroughly prepared for His appearing. To see the full sinfulness of the Jews, and the entire justice of the judgments which came on them after crucifying our Lord, we must remember the ministry of John the Baptist. Christ spoke of John and testified of him that he was the greatest prophet that Israel had in its history.”

John's ministry was to preach a message of radical repentance which was in opposition to the Jewish leadership and which called into question the Jewish ethnic basis for acceptance by God. From the viewpoint of the Jerusalem leadership represented here, John's ministry was indeed threatening. Further, John's role was largely to prepare the way for Jesus, the greater one to follow him, the Son of God (Luke 1:16–17, 32–35, 68–76; 3:16). So acknowledgement that John's message originated with God is tantamount to admitting that Jesus's ministry was itself sanctioned by God.

This reasoning is not lost on the Jerusalem leadership. Luke portrays them as discussing amongst themselves the implications of the choices posed by Jesus's question. They are on the horns of a dilemma. If they attribute divine origin to John's message they will stand self condemned because they rejected John's message and now refuse to accept the divine quality of Jesus's ministry as prophesied by John. On the other hand if they fail to acknowledge the divine origin of John's message they risk falling victim to the wrath of the crowds who rightly considered John to be a prophet and who in stoning them would in effect be accusing them of blasphemy. A yawning chasm has opened up between the Jewish leadership and those they are supposed to lead.

In verse 7 the Jewish leadership finally responds to Jesus' question and Jesus makes his final riposte in verse 8:

“So they answered, "We don't know where it was from." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."”
(verses 7-8)

When the Jerusalem leadership claims ignorance about John's message and ministry we can hear an echo of Jesus's earlier indictment of them concerning their ignorance of the divine visitation which had come amongst them in the person of Jesus (Luke 19:44). As Amos prophesied they were unable to perceive and hear God's word:

“"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for

water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.” (Amos 8:11 NIV)

The final judgement of God is the inability to hear him when he speaks.

So the leaders now stand self condemned for their lack of openness to and recognition of divine visitation. Their answer is nothing more than a feeble attempt to maintain their elevated status in Israel.

Jesus’s answer repeats and fails to answer their original question, but his references to John carry the clear implication that his mission is divinely authorised.

Moreover, in verses 9-19 of chapter 20 Jesus will address the nature and source of his authority in parable form at the same time that he discloses the reason for the forfeiture of divine authority by the Jerusalem leadership. So, the attempt of the Jerusalem leaders to shame Jesus has completely backfired.

Well, Jesus didn’t answer their question and God doesn’t answer all our questions either. If the answers lie within scripture then he expects us to read his word and take note of his answers, but some questions are not answered by scripture, and there I believe we can assume that we don’t need to know those answers. God will not always give us the answers we want, but He gives us something better – Himself – and in that we must be confident: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him”. (Job 13:15 AV)

Returning to the issue of the authority of Jesus, we saw something of Jesus’s authority last week – his ability to heal at a distance by his mere word and his authority over death itself. But Jesus’s authority is greater than that. Jesus has complete and ultimate authority, he is head over everything (Colossians 2:10). Let us not be like the Sanhedrin and fail to hear God’s message to us this morning. Jesus has supreme authority over all creation including us humans; he said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18) and he will come again in mighty power to judge everything (John 5:27). Here and now, prior to that coming, he has

the authority to forgive us our sins and grant us eternal life (John 17:2). Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through him (John 3:16).

In his death on the cross Christ won for us the forgiveness of our sins and achieved our reconciliation with the Father and he secured for us the gift of eternal life with him.

We can do nothing to deserve or attain this gift, all we need to do is to turn to Christ in faith believing in his death and resurrection and acknowledging him as our Lord and Master (Romans 10:9-10). But we do need to do that, otherwise we shall be condemned in Christ's judgement when he comes again. We do need to accept the free pardon won for us by Christ in order for it to be effective in our lives, so if you've never accepted this free pardon or are not sure if you've really done it then I do most earnestly urge you to turn to Christ in faith right here, right now this morning believing in his death and resurrection and acknowledging him as your Lord and Master. Your salvation is much too important to put off until another day. Let's just express that in a few words of prayer that you can if you wish repeat silently along with me. Father I turn to you now in faith, believing in the crucifixion and resurrection of your son Jesus Christ and acknowledging him as my Lord and Master. I repent of all my sins and ask for your forgiveness through Christ's precious blood and humbly ask you to reconcile me to yourself and welcome me into your kingdom as your adopted child. So, if you've done what I said and turned to Christ in faith, then you're assured of eternal life in God's kingdom. We are secure because Christ knows His sheep and not one of them will be lost by the good shepherd. What an incredible blessing.