

By What Authority?
Matthew 21:12-14, 23-32
September 25, 2011

I.

Today is Mission Sunday at St. Thomas. Our new *Program and Ministry Sign-Up Booklet* for 2011-2012 is available on the ministry table in the foyer, and our readings lead us to think about our work in the church and in the community. And as we think about that work, it might be natural to wonder about the authority under which we do it.

We often hear people challenge the authority of others. Sometimes they are argumentative, saying things such as "Who do you think you are," or "You cannot tell me what to do." At other times they can be more judicious. People claiming to represent law enforcement agencies might, for example, be asked to show the credentials that signify their authority.

And, of course, sometimes the authority is obvious from the circumstances. Last spring and summer I was an umpire in our Diamondhead Little League program. If I called a pitch a ball or a strike, or a runner safe or out, or a ball fair or foul, no one challenged my authority. They might have disagreed, but everyone understood that I had authority to make the call.

Our court system offers other examples. Many disputes do not involve disagreements over fact patterns or the meaning of written language, but rather the question of whether one of the parties has authority to do what it proposes.

The current debate over healthcare is a case in point. One issue is whether the government has authority, under the constitution, to require some people to purchase health insurance or pay a penalty. The question likely will be resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court.

So the nature of authority, the need for authority, and the exercise of authority are inherent in our lives. And as we saw in today's Gospel, the question of authority also can arise in the context of God's work in the world. Let's look at this story about a challenge to Jesus' authority.

II.

We can begin by reviewing the setting of the events. There is general agreement that this Gospel reading is set in Jerusalem on Tuesday of Passion Week. Jesus had made his triumphal entry into the city two days earlier, which we celebrate as Palm Sunday, and then on Monday he uncharacteristically trashed the temple as described in first two verses of our reading.

And that dramatic event was just another threat to Jewish leaders. Even before Palm Sunday they had decided to kill Jesus because of the influence of his miracles (Mt. 12:14), and because he had publically called them a "brood of vipers" (Mt 12:34).

Then, as Jesus caused chaos among the money changers in the temple, he also accused temple leaders of maintaining a den of thieves (Mt. 21:13). This only angered them further and solidified their desire to get rid of him (Mk. 11:18).

Jesus, however, calmly returned to the temple the next day and was teaching, perhaps acting as though nothing had happened. And the chief priests and elders of the temple approached him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

We might wonder why they asked that question. They already knew who Jesus claimed to be, and had been watching him for a while. The Gospels have many examples of previous encounters between Jesus and his disciples who were teaching a new doctrine on one hand, and religious leaders who wanted to maintain the old system structure on the other.

But once again Jesus' accusers were not asking a good faith question. They were trying to trick him into saying something that could be used against him. And as the Gospel tells us, he turned the tables by asking whether John the Baptist's authority was from God or of human origin.

Now, this might seem an odd response, Why John the Baptist? But it put Jesus' questioners on the spot. If they said John's authority was from God they would have admitted Jesus' authority also was from God because John said Jesus was the Messiah. But if they said John's authority was human they would have undercut John's popularity as a prophet, and offended the people.

So, they took the fifth. They said they did not know, which of course actually was an answer in itself because it meant they could not deny Jesus' divine origins.

And the rest is history. Jesus continued teaching in the temple that day, and then left, calling it a "desolate" place (Mt. 27:38) never to return again. He spent Wednesday with friends, Thursday with his disciples, and died for our sins on Friday.

III.

This story calls us to think about our lives and our Christian beliefs. If Jesus actually had answered the chief priests' question about the source of his authority we know what he would have said. But what could we say in answer to the same question?

By what authority does the church today proclaim the Gospel? By what authority do I even stand here and preach about it? By what authority do we come together here today? And by what authority do you speak to your friends and neighbors about your faith?

The Bible offers answers to all of those questions. The church was established by the apostles, who were commissioned by Jesus to do so (Mt. 28:18-20). Preachers are called to proclaim the Gospel (Acts 10:42) and refute those who contradict it (Ti. 1:9). We worship here today under Jesus' authority as head of the church (Col. 1:18).

And finally, you speak to others because you are part of the priesthood of all believers, so eloquently proclaimed by St. Peter. He said all Christians are "A royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pe. 2:9).

We might lack some things in life, but the authority and duty to proclaim and honor God's word is not one of them. In explaining the Good News of salvation, St. Paul said in Romans that people cannot believe in something they have not heard, and they cannot hear without someone to proclaim it, and someone cannot proclaim it unless they are sent (10:14-15).

So there is our authority, our call, and our mission. And it is based upon God's Word revealed through the Bible.

IV.

But that doesn't convince everyone, does it? Many people in our community are not in any church this morning. And it's not because something has kept them away; it's because they just don't come to church. Or if they come at other times it's not to worship but to participate in social activities. And that often has little to do with the authority of the Bible.

What do we think about that? Certainly it's good to get people to come through our doors at any time for just about any reason. At least they're here and there is a chance they might come back. But if they simply come back for more of the same it probably won't last long.

The real objectives are not only that they come back, but also that people come the first time, because in either event we are a church. The most important thing we do happens on Sunday morning beginning at 8:00 and 10:00 am. And the next most important thing is that we teach and proclaim the Word to ourselves, our young people, and the community at other times.

We try to do that through Bible studies, Christian education programs, and Sunday School. We also have our Amazing Praisers plays, and discipleship programs such as Cursillo, the Alpha course we just completed, and the Forty Days in the Word program we will begin after it comes out in January. And our Woodland Village ministry is another example of doing what Jesus did.

All of these, as well as others, are described in the 2011-2012 *Program and Ministry Sign-Up Booklet* I mentioned earlier. I urge you to take a copy and review it. It is an authoritative summary of what we do, and could be able to do, here at St. Thomas.

And as we exercise the authority that God has given us through his holy Word, we all know it is important to exercise it in a righteous manner. We know the "holier than thou" approach does not work. We know that being judgmental does not work.

I'm reminded of the story about the newly minted second lieutenant, fresh from Officer Candidate School, who asked a veteran sergeant for change for a dollar to use in a vending machine. The sergeant casually said, "Yeah, there's some change around here somewhere."

The young officer said, "Sergeant, that's no way to speak to an officer. Let's start over. Do you have change for a dollar." The sergeant immediately snapped to attention, fired off a salute, and said, "No, Sir!"

Just as the young officer did not get change because of his attitude, the church also cannot be dogmatic. Preachers cannot be imperious. And as we speak with our friends and neighbors we are do so in humility and love. Even so, we are called to remember the biblical authority we have been given, and to act confidently in it. We are, after all, inviting people to come to church.

V.

And so, we do what we do, not in our own power but through the authority given to us in Scripture. As St. Paul said in today's reading from Philippians, "God is at work in [us], enabling [us] both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:13).

I pray that we can continue to know even more deeply the words of our Lord and the saints revealed to us in Scripture. It is not just a history book, but rather the source of all authority for the church and ourselves. And when we trust it we will please the Lord and be doing our best. *Amen.*