*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

Sermon for Proper 21A

# The Text: Matthew 21:23-32

“By whose authority are you doing these things?”

“Who said you could do that?”

“Who says so?”

These are words of protest, accusation, and doubt, but they’re also words of rebellion. The person who usually asks these questions is challenging the authority of the other person. It’s a basic question of who’s in control; who’s the boss right here, right now.

As Australians, we typically like to challenge every authority. We like to disobey or question our parents, thinking we know better than them. We like to see how much we can get away with at work, like attempting to fool our bosses by taking sickies on long weekends (unless of course we don’t trust any other bosses and want to be self-employed). We flash our lights at oncoming traffic to ‘stick it’ to the police who may have a speed camera up ahead. We like to rubbish or lampoon our Prime Minister or parliamentarians. Basically, if anyone thinks they’re above us in any way, we’ll soon cut them down to size!

But when we do these things, we’re attempting to set ourselves up as our own authority, our own boss, or even our own little god who controls our own little world.

When we complain about our parents, our boss, our Prime Minister, or our pastor, we’re really complaining about God who placed them in their position of authority in the first place. They don’t even have to be Christian for God to place them there, after all, even Jesus tells Pontius Pilate he recognises his authority to crucify him (or not) because it was given to him from above (Jn 19:10-11).

In this sense, whenever we challenge or question those in authority over us, we’re challenging or questioning God’s authority, which brings us to the gospel reading for today.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem on a donkey and overturned the marketing tables in the temple. The local authorities (which were the chief priests and elders) came to challenge Jesus by asking whose authority he was doing these things. In other words, “We’re the local authority, and we reckon you have no authority here, so you better come up with your authorised credentials quickly or you’re in big trouble!”

He, in turn, asked them a question about authority. He wanted them to answer by who’s authority had John the Baptist been baptising people? Was he doing this with heavenly authority (which meant it was authorised by God), or was it from humans (which meant it was false, unauthorised, illegitimate, and therefore possibly evil)?

Now, as the local authority experts, they had the choice to back John’s baptisms as authorised by God himself (and therefore give their theological and pastoral blessing to it), or else reject it as false and evil. Since they hadn’t acted on stopping or getting rid of John earlier, you’d think they’d side with his baptisms being authorised by heaven (which many of the lay people believed it was), but they stopped short of doing this for one reason: fear!

The local authorities were afraid of the people and their opinions. Giving up their authority to say what was of God and what wasn’t, they now disqualified themselves from their position of authority. As disqualified leaders who lacked the courage to trust the work of God, Jesus wouldn’t entrust these people with the answer to their question.

When we’re afraid of what people will think of us and our faith, we’re often too afraid to listen to, and trust, God’s authority.

Because we’re afraid of what people will say, or think, or do to us, we give others a kind of fake authority which entraps us into more fear. Instead of letting God have the final authority and the last word on a matter, we listen to the opinions of others. When we’re afraid, we don’t listen to God properly. In response God will often challenge the authority of what we're afraid of, but we often let our fears deceive us into a false sense of security.

Jesus goes on to teach these disqualified authorities through a parable of two sons – one who said ‘no’, but later obeyed his father’s authority, and the other who said ‘yes’, but then rebelled. He compared these two sons with two groups of people – the ‘tax-collectors and prostitutes’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven and the ‘chief priests and elders of the law’ who won’t.

One group lived rebellious lives but believed John’s and Jesus’ ministry and so acted accordingly in faith, while the other group did and said all the right things on the surface (and so seemed righteous in many people’s eyes, including their own), but didn’t believe their ministry was from God and therefore wouldn’t enter the kingdom.

But notice it wasn’t just faith itself (as if only believing in our own head or heart is enough), but a faith which trusted *and* acted according to what he or she believed, and so *participated* in the life and ministry of God’s authorised representatives.

“By what authority are you doing these things?”

Well, let’s see. Pastors, as called and ordained servants of the Word forgive us all our sins. In the stead of, and by the command of, Christ, they forgive us as Christ’s personal ambassadors. Of course, we could believe our own opinions or thoughts which might want to challenge those words. We could believe others who will keep reminding us of our failures or mistakes or regrets. Or you could trust when Jesus says we’re forgiven, we’re forgiven. He has the authority to forgive us and has passed on this heavenly privilege to his church, which is enacted through its authorised servants.

Similarly, at the end of Matthew’s gospel account we hear Jesus has been given all authority and now hands this authority to the church to baptise and teach. We enact this heavenly authority whenever we baptise people.

Whenever we celebrate the Lord’s Supper Christ’s words are repeated and Christ’s authority is enacted. Here again God’s word does what it says so that the bread and wine we eat and drink is also the very body and blood of Christ himself given for us for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith.

Of course we could believe our own opinions about this meal and think it only a symbolic reenactment, or on the other hand we could trust Jesus’ authority to share with us his very own body and blood for us, which means heaven itself, in all its fullness, touches us here.

You see, it’s not just *by whose* authority we’re doing all these things, but *how* this authority is enacted. In the reading from Philippians this morning we hear how Jesus didn’t use his authority to lord it over you and me, but he emptied himself and became a suffering servant to do his Father’s will.

He trusted and obeyed his Father’s authority by enduring the cruel cross and dying for you and me. You could say he’s unlike the sons in the parable. He’s never changed his mind – his answer has always been, and always will be, a ‘yes’ for you and me - both in intention *and* in action.

Jesus Christ always exercises his heavenly rule and authority according to the upside-down ways of God’s kingdom for us. He comes as a servant for our sake. He serves us by forgiving us, washing us clean, adopting us as his brothers and sisters, feeding us with his own body and blood, teaching us his ways, and blesses us in order that we may also serve as his own authorized, humble servants wherever he’s placed us.

He’s given us the authority *to serve* – to faithfully serve as a child, a parent, a citizen, or a boss, under the authority of God. Like Christ himself, we don’t use this authority to rule, but to serve humbly in such a way we don’t think of ourselves as better than anyone else, but as if others are better than us. Because we’re united with the suffering Servant, we don’t look for ways to serve our own interests, but we instead serve the interest of others.

This means, instead of thinking ‘What’s in it for *me*?’ we may instead think ‘How may I best serve *you* today?’

Don't be like those who grumble about those in authority above them, or like those who seek to deceive out of fear, but let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no’ as we all submit ourselves under the authority of God to serve each other in humbleness and grace. And the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, which will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.