

Questions of Authority

In the name of him who is Lord over all, dear friends in Christ: Some people just don't seem to get it. I'm talking about those who don't seem to understand that there exists in all facets of life a certain established system of limits and boundaries that define very clearly what is each person's area of responsibility and what is not. Be it at home, in your place in the family, in your job at work or in school, or in your assigned role in other organizations, you know what decisions belong to you and to your discretion and which do not. And most of us would never dream of overstepping those boundaries in order dictate to someone else what they should be doing when it comes to the decisions and areas of responsibility that belong to them alone. We might offer a little helpful advice now and then; but even so, we want to be very careful not to overdo it.

But like I said, some people just don't get it. These are the ones who feel they must impose their opinions and their will upon others. They're not satisfied only looking over their own affairs but also feel compelled to invade the realm of others and issue what amount to commands about things that don't concern them at all. No one likes it when they do. This is why there's a long list of stock phrases for telling that kind of person to mind their own business, like: "Who do you think you are ordering me around?" Or "What gives you the right to tell me how to raise my kids, or what kind of car I should drive, or which color to paint my house, or *whatever?*" Or "You're not my boss. Where do you get off telling me how to do my job?" and "When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it". Yes, there're lots of ways to say it; including the old and perennial favorite: "Who died and made you king?" All of these are ways of telling someone that they've crossed the line and that they're imposing themselves where they're not welcome.

The reason I mention this is because it's the same message conveyed to Jesus by the chief priests of the temple and the political elders of Judea in today's Gospel reading. And to put their comments into historical perspective, you need to know that the story we heard transpires on Monday of Holy Week. The day before was Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem with a sizeable crowd of his rag-tag followers. Waving palm branches and laying their garments in the street to form a makeshift red carpet, they sang their hosannas and hailed him as the long awaited Messianic King. People from the city joined the joyous throng as it wound its way through the narrow streets up to the Temple. There Jesus dismounted from his borrowed donkey, passed through the gate, and stepped onto the Temple's outer court. He was appalled to find it choked with the stalls of moneychangers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. The latter had pens full of their bleating merchandise right there handy so that they'd made the Temple of God look and smell more like stockyard than a house of prayer. Jesus was filled with indignation and in righteous fury drove them all out. Chastised merchants and terrified animals scattered and disappeared through the gates leading back into the city as if they were cockroaches fleeing into drains in a street gutter. Jesus then spent the rest of the day there on the newly cleared court healing the sick and lame who came to him from every quarter of the city.

Now, today, Jesus has returned to the Temple. This time he is teaching. A large crowd sits quietly around him hanging on his every word. And it really galls the priests and leaders who were supposed to be in charge there. This was, after all, their turf. And you can well imagine how they spent the afternoon and evening before hearing the complaints of all those "honest merchants" who "only desired to serve the needs of the Lord's worshippers" who had been driven out by "that madman, Jesus". "And, hey, we had a deal with you guys. We pay

rent for that space and you take a share of our profits". Today, of course, the merchants are back. Now they're complaining that they dare not set up shop again as long as that violent crazy man is permitted to stay here teaching. "We're losing money here, and so are you. When are you going to do something about him, hmmm?" And the trouble is that on some deeper level, the Temple authorities know that Jesus is right about this issue. It really isn't proper for such business to be conducted in the Temple; it's just that it's gone on for a while now and they like the kickbacks, so they've gotten used to the idea. So now, even though they know he's right, they hate the fact that Jesus has embarrassed them by overriding their authority and taking it into his own hands to clean the mess up. He's made them look both corrupt and incompetent.

The other thing that galls them is that Jesus is so popular with the crowd. Here they are: the experts. They are learned men who have studied their whole lives to be teachers of the law. They've worked hard to be the best of the best – that's how they've earned their place among the scholars in the Temple as opposed to the lesser lights who are out teaching in the towns and villages. And none of them, not even the most eloquent or dynamic, has ever gathered such a following as this man ... this homespun stump preacher from nearly pagan Galilee who has no credentials and near as anyone can tell has no formal education. He's got a lot of nerve taking it upon himself to play teacher of Torah in the Temple itself. And here he is packing them in so it's standing room only. It's presumptuous. It's infuriating. It's degrading. And it fills them with envy. They must shut him down; but how do you do that and not upset or alienate the crowd that they really want to win back to their side?

They come up with a question of authority. It's something everyone in the crowd will understand and be able to relate to. It's also something that Jesus, if he is indeed the law and order guy he claims to be, will have to acknowledge. *We* are in charge of the Temple and what goes on in it, not him. *We* have been appointed to this task. And no one has the right to usurp our authority and take it upon himself to move in here and start acting like he owns the place.

Their official delegation pushes through the crowd gathered around Jesus to confront him. From their point of view, it's a win – win situation. If when asked about the source of his authority Jesus says, "I do this on my own accord", they can politely ask him to leave; and if he refuses, they could force him out or arrest him. On the other hand, if he says he's been sent by God, they could bring him up on charges of blasphemy. "How is it that the Lord spoke to you about doing all these things and didn't bother to mention it to us, the very people he's appointed through proper channels to be in charge?"

So, they put the question to Jesus: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" It's a tense moment. This is a power struggle, pure and simple. And everyone there realizes what's at stake.

But have you ever noticed how often Jesus answers a question with a question? And have you noticed how his questions usually defuse the polemic grenades his enemies toss his way? In reply, Jesus says, "That's a good question you've put to me. And I'm willing to answer it; but first I'd like you to answer one of mine. The Baptism of John, from where did it come? Was it from heaven or from men?"

Again, it's a question of authority. Did John take it upon himself to begin his ministry of calling people to repentance and baptizing them, or was he commissioned by God for the task? Now the Temple authorities find themselves in a pickle. If they say John's baptism was from heaven, Jesus has got them in a corner because everyone knows they rejected John. So they'd be admitting that they were mistaken about him – which they dare not do in front of the people

because then they'd lose face. On the other hand, if they say John was a self-appointed upstart the crowd will be angry because common consensus is that he had been a genuine prophet of God. They dare not say anything bad about him. So their win – win solution suddenly becomes a lose – lose dilemma. They decide to play it safe and punt. “We don't know”, they answer.

There's probably more truth in that reply than they care to admit; but what I'd have you see is that by asking this question Jesus reveals the fiction of their supposed authority. They have been imagining that they are the experts in charge; but when asked to render an expert, authoritative judgment on a spiritual matter – the very thing they have been placed in authority to do – they can't do it. Fear of being exposed as hypocrites on one hand, or on the other, fear of losing popularity with the masses, paralyzes them. It proves that they aren't really in charge like they think they are but are in fact being controlled by other forces. To be specific they are being controlled by their fear, their pride, their greed, their jealousy—these things are their masters – or in a word: sin. It's granted them the illusion of being in control. It's deceived them with the image of having authority. But now Jesus shows what's really directing affairs in the Temple.

And that, of course, is why he's come: to set things right. He's here to reestablish the authority of the Lord in his Temple. And as we've seen, he does it with a three prong attack. He drives out what doesn't belong, he heals what's diseased and broken, and he teaches God's Word. And what impels him is his all consuming zeal for God's house and his infinite love for God's people; not greed, jealousy, or pride, and certainly not fear, for if he'd been afraid of anything, knowing as he did what would happen to him in just four days, this is the last place on earth he'd be.

Jesus didn't answer his enemies' question about his authority and who gave it to him. The crowd with Jesus had given the answer the day before when they said, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” For his own part, Jesus didn't need to answer because his actions spoke louder than words. And of course from our perspective as Christians, we see how foolish the question was. I mean, if the Lord Jesus is not in charge of the Temple, who is? It was for his worship the place was built. It was the place his Word was to be heard. And the sacrifices that took place there daily were all pointing to him and the death he would die to atone for the sins of the world.

As believers in him, we are the beneficiaries of his sacrifice. He purchased and won us from sin and death with the holy, precious blood he shed on our behalf. And by the indwelling of his Spirit he has made each one of us his Temple. And this is where today's text applies to each of us: it's the question of authority. Who's in charge of your Temple?

I mentioned at the outset that there are people who just don't seem to get it. They try to force their will upon others. The leaders of the Temple saw Jesus that way. He was stepping on their toes and they didn't like it. I wonder if sometimes we don't see Jesus the same way. After all, we imagine that we are the resident experts on personal fulfillment and what leads to happiness in our lives, and we don't want him barging in and imposing his will on us. We all have those areas that we've made compromises with the way the world operates. We've deceived ourselves into thinking that they're not so bad, and we've let them go on long enough now that we've come to a certain agreement with them – and by so doing we've turned our Temples into stinking stockyards full of filth instead of the houses of prayer and worship they were meant to be. Then on top of it we fear being exposed as the hypocrites we are, and we fear becoming unpopular if we stand up for what we believe is right. If any of this sounds familiar, it shouldn't be hard to see who's really in charge of your Temple. It's not you; it's your old sin nature. It's the side of you that pretends to be in charge while it challenges the genuine

authority of Jesus. It's the side of you that asks Jesus, "What gives you the right to tell me what to do?" Or, and I hope you see the irony here, "Who died and made you king?"

It's certainly the wrong question to ask Jesus because you already know the answer. And really, it's the wrong way to think about it. If we acknowledge that we are indeed Temples of the Lord, then it's not Jesus Christ who is the unwelcome interloper barging into our lives and attempting to take control; but rather we ourselves who are attempting to impose our sinful and selfish wills on what belongs to him. We are the ones who don't get it. We've been purchased with a price. We don't belong to ourselves; but to him. Which is why Jesus is here today to set things straight with the same three pronged attack: to cast out what doesn't belong in here, to create in us a new heart to replace old one sickened and twisted by sin, and to teach us God's Word with authority so that his will and his Spirit are what reign in our bodies...

...Our bodies both as individuals and also collectively in this Church which is the body of Christ. Just as we must come to see that these bodies don't belong to us, we must see also that this Church and its teachings and practices are not ours to do with as we please. They belong to Jesus. His is the only Word with authority here; but sadly, not everyone sees it that way. Some time back I read an article in the paper written by a local pastor. He mentioned how much he enjoyed having people from different perspectives come to his Bible studies: atheists, agnostics, adherents of different religions, he welcomed them all because he said he enjoyed the stimulating conversation and the sharing of diverse ideas. The only one he said he wouldn't welcome was someone with what he called "an authoritarian agenda" – by which I'm sure he meant a person who took a stand on God's Word and knew what he believed, why he believed it, and who was unwilling to compromise the truth. Now, I don't imagine he meant to say so, but that would mean Jesus would not be welcome at his Bible studies because certainly he has an authoritarian agenda. I'm all for sharing ideas and stimulating discourse; but in the end every human thought and opinion must be captive to the Word and the authority of Jesus Christ. And we do well to remember this in everything we do together here as his Church.

It all comes down to a question of authority: Who's in charge in your life? Who has the authority in the Church? May God our Father keep us steadfast in his Word so that in all things we may honor Jesus Christ, and by our words and actions crown him Lord of all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!