

Matthew 21:23-32 Sermon

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?

This question, asked of Jesus 2,000 years ago is especially relevant today. What makes authority acceptable? What is an appropriate source of authority and who can claim it? These are all issues which get very confused in our media and even in the conversations we have with people each day.

We hear politicians talk of 'having a mandate' or 'not having a mandate' for a particular plan, by which they mean that they feel that enough people voted for them at some point in the past that they may enact some policy decision without further reference to the voters.

We remember all too well, the call to 'follow the science' that rang out during Covid from those who believed that some sort of homogenous medical science would give us all the answers to all the questions being raised. Of course, looking back, we can see that life just isn't that simple and there was no single 'scientific' opinion, but instead a confusing set of issues all impinging upon each other. The search for a single source of authority in such a complex moment of global crisis was not simple.

There are so many other sources of authority and we shift between them all the time. For example, I know someone who has a health problem for which they should probably see their G.P. They won't see their G.P. because their friend believes that they won't get the help they need in doing so, and so instead, on the strength of their friend's advice, they will probably suffer for a while before paying for treatment they may or may not need. This person is actually fairly typical as an example of how we all fluidly shift between sources of authority for the decisions we make all the time. We use intuition, friends, specialists and experts, history, politics and cultural norms all the time in a web of authoritative pic'n'mix.

The wrong source of authority can even be harmful. I'll never forget sharing lectures with a Russian Orthodox ordinand during the Russian annexation of Crimea. His version of events was completely at odds with mine, not because we were seeing something different, but because the source of the interpretation of the events he treated as authoritative was at odds with mine. I'd imagine this has only become more polarized in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict.

So, all this is to say that sources of authority are important, and yet often unidentified and assumed, or else fluid and difficult to articulate. If you don't believe me, just ask yourself what the last big decision you made was and what all the influences upon you were when you were considering it.

I'm labouring the point because I think this is really important, and the Gospel reading this morning is all about authority and its source. To be blunt, without a credible source of authority, basing our lives upon Jesus' teaching would be no better than basing our lives on the wisdom of the Daily Mail – lots of people do it, but you've really got to question it!

For Jesus, this question isn't about himself alone. Like us, he sees himself within the larger story of God and in particular, for Jesus, his authority is connected to that of John the Baptist. The chief priests and Pharisees have to grapple, not just with Jesus's authority, but with the authority of John, and by extension with the authority of all the prophets who claim to speak in God's name.

Their conundrum is clear. If they say that John had no ultimate authority, then they can safely ignore him, and Jesus as well. Both claim to come from God and speak on behalf of God. To ignore them, and all those who have come with words from God before, means they can retain their claim to be the legitimate authority on the important matters of life. If John and Jesus were no different

from anyone else, with no external authority to back them up, they can be just relegated to perspectives, which can be adopted or ignored at my own decision – just like we do every day of the week. Particularly for the religious and political leaders of the time, just like for us, if John and Jesus have no claim to authority, then their dissenting voices can be ignored, mocked and silenced to prevent any sort of counterclaim to the assumed authority of the ruling elite.

You can see the easy and clear parallels today – both in terms of ruling elite, religious leaders, pressure groups and also individuals making their own minds up about who to believe. If John and Jesus have no external authority, they are just a perspective, which many will tell us should be replaced by something a bit more concrete. The irony is that by ‘concrete’ the tendency is to expect us to believe that their perspective is more solid than anyone else’s!

Back to the passage. If, however, the leaders of the day were to admit that John’s authority was from God, then they have a huge problem. They’d have to have taken it seriously in the past, and take it seriously now. They are clearly unwilling to do that. In fact, if you look at the passage carefully, their deliberation isn’t really related at all to the actual question. Instead, it’s about the impact of their answer. Perhaps they don’t really care whether Jesus’ authority is from heaven or not – to admit the possibility would be just too costly.

That’s quite commonplace today too. Probably all of us, if we are honest, have a ‘this-far-and-no-further’ attitude to God. It boils down to authority. If we admit that God is the source of authority, then we have no real option but to follow Jesus, even if it costs us or changes our lives in a way which makes us uncomfortable. If we admit that Jesus is from God, then the things he says and does and commands his followers to do are binding upon us. So we tend to just ignore that sense in which Jesus has authority. Literally, as the passage says, ‘if we say “from heaven”, he will say to us, “why then did you not believe him?”’ If we truly believe Jesus is who he claims to be, then why do we retain partial control over our lives instead of giving ourselves over in servanthood of God?

Most of us, like the Israelite leaders, inhabit a halfway-house mentality, where we adopt the bits of Jesus that we like, and then ignore or even try to silence the bits that we don’t. Jesus’ final comment to his questioners boils down to ‘if you aren’t going to be honest with yourselves about this whole question of authority, then why should I answer you?’

So the question from this reading ends up being, am I taking seriously Jesus’ claim to authority from heaven? That is either as a follower of Jesus who needs to reflect again on whether there is actually some internal inconsistency within me who claims to follow, but then doesn’t really when I don’t like where that leads me.

Or, perhaps the authority of Jesus is something I don’t yet accept. In which case, ask yourself what authorities you are trusting and whether they are grounded as well as you think they are. Some claim to trust science and rationalism, but the latest thinking shows that it turns out that these are far from as objective or trustworthy as we think they are, and that no-one really leads lives which are consistent with them anyway! Many you trust in a kind of humanistic materialism, accepting that this life is all there is, but again, you’ve got to square that with an inherited kind of ethical system which boils down to an 18th-19th century secular Christianity without the God-bit. No-one actually lives a consistent, full-blown version of this, and many assumptions of what it looks like to live well are really inconsistent with the original premise. Maybe you just don’t think about where you get your authority from, trusting instead those who you feel are trustworthy. Then let me offer an example of the most trustworthy life available to you – Jesus – who taught about loving enemies, cared for the needy, challenged authority and suffered for what he authentically believed. Unlike

others though, he took it through the end and died for his beliefs and the claims of his own identity. This identity was then vindicated in the strongest possible terms as he was raised from the dead. The Church, with all its scars and warts, is the witness to this claim, that ordinary people can find their own source of authority within Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. It doesn't make us perfect, but then that means there's a place for everyone within this broken community trying to live for Jesus better. My invitation is to join us. Make the world a better place. But even better than that, make it a more heavenly place by following Jesus, the most trustworthy authority of all. Amen.