

Authority is a strong word, denoting power and privilege. A person with authority exercises control over the lives and welfare of other people. Society cannot operate without having some people in positions of authority; the alternative would be anarchy and chaos.

Jesus has performed three symbolic actions.

Jesus has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding in on a donkey and being hailed by the crowds as the Son of David, the fulfilment of their hopes and prophecies and dreams, coming in the name of the Lord to usher in the new world order.

Then immediately after that, according to Matthew, Jesus went into the Temple and overturned the tables of the traders and claiming that sacred space back for God.

As a result, in verse 14, he continues a ministry of healing; showing that he has authority not just over the crowds and the religious institutions but authority over nature itself.

Is it any wonder then, in the light of all this frenetic exhibition of power, that we read the opening words of our passage today in verse 23: "When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'" Who was this young brash Jew? Can't you hear them now asking, who does he think he is?

In our text today the Lord, sets forth His authority first by His response to the Jewish leaders' question and then by a stinging parable. There is nothing like or no better feeling than to shut someone up or down for that matter with words. We've all been there waiting to settle the score or win an argument with someone who thinks they know everything. When they cannot respond, we enjoy the moment. We blow off our six shooters and mark the points. Alright, that was a bit cocky, and Jesus wasn't cocky.

Jesus was clearly a threat to the religious and social leaders of the day. He was exhibiting enormous and miraculous powers, the crowds were absolutely enthralled by him, his courage and boldness in confronting the institutions of power was astounding. Of course, they would want to question his authority...

And the questioning comes out of the security they felt in their own authority. They were the leaders. The Chief Priests were in a spiritual lineage that went all the way back to Moses. The Scribes were the most learned theologians in Jewish society. The Elders had years of experience and had the unquestioning respect of the people.

But Jesus is smarter than all of them and has absolutely no intention in getting engaged in some abstract and conceptual debate about the nature of his authority in an attempt to prove that his authority is greater than theirs. Instead, he decides to ask them a question that will cause them to struggle as they are caused to reflect on the true nature of authority itself, verse 24: "Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also

tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

Now, this was a tough question for the religious leaders to answer, as Matthew rightly points out to us in verse 26 and 27, because no matter what they said, the answer was bound to upset someone...If they agreed that John the Baptist's ministry came from God, then Jesus would say, "So why didn't you listen to him and follow him?" But if they said that his ministry was not from God, then the crowds would have turned on them because they loved John the Baptist. There was no way they could win the argument against a question like that so, as Matthew tells us in verse 27, the best answer they could come up with was: "We don't know".

And in that moment, the religious leaders were unmasked for who they truly were. They claimed authority and power and privilege over the people. But their chief concern was to protect their standing in society and to protect their reputations. They didn't give an answer because they didn't want to lose what they had. Perhaps one of my favorite writers said it best, Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts - perhaps the fear of loss of power - JOHN STEINBECK Spiritual and political leadership demands courage to do what is right - often at the expense of personal gain and popularity. We must pray for your leaders...and ourselves.

But the leaders that Jesus was addressing were unable to recognize the authority of Jesus to challenge them in this way for the simple reason that he was acting out of a form of authority that they had never witnessed before. For them, authority came with a title, with respect in society, with wealth and prestige, with the ability to make decisions that the people would unquestioningly obey and with the weight of history on their side. But that was not the type of authority that Jesus was modelling to them as the authority of the Kingdom of God...

The authority of Jesus was of a completely different order altogether. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of sinners and prostitutes. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of little children. The authority of Jesus was worked out in his welcoming of the outcasts and those on the margins. Ultimately, the authority of Jesus was worked out in a life of service, not ruling; a life hallmarked by betrayal and personal sacrifice, rejection, torture and a criminal's death on the cross. That is where the authority of Jesus lay: not in some sort of power game that brought with it prestige and wealth and the respect of the people. And the religious leaders had never seen anything like that before and had no idea how to respond to it.

But in the light of this passage, I ask for us to remember that if St. Paul's church is to become a leading authority in the community it should and will not be hallmarked by wealth and power and prestige but will instead be hallmarked by service, and welcoming those on the margins and welcoming the little children. It will be a community of sacrifice and vulnerability where those on the margins find a home. That is what authority in the Kingdom of God looks like and that is what a truly Christlike church must look like...

The challenge to us in this passage is the extent to which we are prepared to develop our gifts and position in this community to love and to serve those in need rather than to seek prestige

and honor and respect from others. That is the ultimate value that underpins the work of God's vineyard, as Jesus goes on to outline in the second part of this passage, with the parable he gives his hearers.

Now, this is a very interesting parable and a massive challenge to Jesus' first hearers for a reason that we easily miss because we are 21st-century people living in a struggling America desperate to find a balance of unity instead of discord. There is a catch to this parable that is easy to miss...

Jesus wants his hearers to make a choice between the sons; which one has done the right thing and which one has done the wrong thing. The choice is simple: a son who disobeys his father by saying 'No' to him, but then changes his mind and a son who says 'Yes' to his father, but then doesn't go on to do what he said. Which is the better son?

To us, the choice is obvious: the better son is the first one, who first says 'No' but goes on to do the right thing. But that wasn't the obvious choice for his first hearers in their culture because the first son who said 'No' would have brought real shame and embarrassment on his father by disobeying him. OK, he went on to do the right thing in the end. But in terms of undermining the social standing of his father in the eyes of the community, the damage had been done in his initial refusal to obey. So, in reality, the behavior of the first son was no better than the second son: they were both equally guilty in the eyes of their father.

But Jesus wants the religious people to choose between them; they are both equally sinful – but which one is more likely to be redeemed in the eyes of the father? In the light of that, there is only one choice to make...redemption and forgiveness is available to the son who at first disobeys and embarrasses his father but is not available to the son who mocks his father – and continues to mock him – by his refusal to do what is asked of him.

So, this isn't a parable about the choices we make so much as a parable about the need to honor the Father and to give him his due.

And the key word in this passage comes in verse 29: "But later he changed his mind and went..." The phrase 'changed his mind' is not a particularly good translation of the Greek where another word would be used for that idea. A more literal translation would be to say: "Later he changed what he cared about and went..."

And that is the key idea here. When this son said 'No' to his father, all he really cared about was his own comfort, his own way of living. But later, he changed what he cared about and chose instead to care for the honor of his father and then went out into the vineyard to work for him.

At the heart of this passage is a simple question: What do you care about? What do I care about? Are we like the religious leaders to whom Jesus is talking, whose primary care is for social standing and personal reputation and the comforts that come with a lifestyle of privilege? Or is our primary concern going to be for the honor of our Father God who asks us to go out and work for him in the vineyard of his Kingdom? If our primary concern is for the honor of

God, we will be called out of our comfort zone and we will need to undertake some work for him. But that is what he asks of us...

And the message of this parable is that, if we respond to the call of the Father and change our concern from us to him, then we will be acceptable to him, regardless of what we have done in the past. All of us have said 'No' to our Father God in the past. But as soon as we say 'Yes' to him, the past is washed away and no longer counts against us in his sight. It doesn't matter what our past contains: all that matters is the 'Yes'. And that is why Jesus is then able to say what he does in verse 31: "Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

The religious leaders to whom Jesus was speaking were still locked into their 'No' to God and so, until they changed their concern, there was no hope of them entering the kingdom of God. But the sinners and those on the margins of society had changed their concern and turned their 'No' into a 'Yes' and so they were perfectly acceptable to God

What about us? Are we too fearful of saying Yes to God? Do we think the secrets of our past or the shame of our present life is too much for him? That's not the message in this passage and that's not the message of the Christian Gospel.

The past is gone – the present can be healed. All God wants is a 'Yes', so we can let him into our lives so we can experience his love and his healing power. And then and only then can we become a beacon of hope for others.

Let us remember the authority is God and he is in control always and he is always with us.