

Those of you who are regulars will know that I am usually dressed up in robes with my Reader's scarf on when I preach. That didn't seem necessary or appropriate this morning, given that both Alison and Hester are 'up front'. But, dressed in civvies, you might then, quite reasonably, ask me the same question as is put to Jesus: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" And my answer to that would be very straightforward: by the authority of the Church of England, as given to me in writing by the Bishop of Durham. And here is the evidence!

But, of course, Jesus had no such letter, and nor did John the Baptist. Although clearly adherents to the Jewish religion – though Jesus more clearly than John the Baptist, as we know from His teaching in synagogues and here in the temple – they were both 'unauthorised' – they didn't have that authority bestowed on them. And that is, partly at least, what leads to the confrontation in the first part of our gospel reading.¹

And Jesus refuses to answer their question in the way that they want Him to. Implicitly, indirectly, He refuses to uphold their image of themselves. He does not accept their authority, but neither does He undermine it by proclaiming His own. In a slippery bit of dialogue, He repeatedly eludes their efforts to entangle Him.

The chief priests and elders — those religious professionals — take it for granted that they are the ones with real authority. But Jesus exposes their lack of authenticity. They do not love and serve those they lead. Instead, they fear them: "We are afraid of the crowd." They are doing what they are supposed to do at least, in their own eyes: challenging a likely threat, the threat that Jesus poses to their religion. Yet, reading this passage drives us to the conclusion that what they embody here is wrong.

The reason is easy to see. Their behaviour is shown to be a perversion of true godliness: first, because it is driven by fear, not faith; second, because it leads them to tell a lie. The clincher, then, is those four short words in English (only two in Greek, apparently) — "We do not know." That is their lie; for plainly they do know. When they explain their thinking, it is based not on what they actually know is true, but on their fear of the consequences of that truth. They know, in short, that their position is indefensible, and, like a witness telling lies in court, their only defence is shifty prevarication: "We do not know." So, they lack not only real authority, but also authenticity, and they refuse to acknowledge the truth that they actually know.

And Jesus knows that the chief priests and elders will not let the truth get in the way of what suits them. So, to expose the truth, He gives them an indirect answer, in the form of

¹ I am grateful to Cally Hammond, in the Church Times 25/9/26, for quite a bit of what follows.

a parable. This parable imagines two sons, the first who initially resists doing as his father asks, the second saying that he will carry out his father's wishes, but then doing nothing. The second son stands for the people who made a commitment, in theory, to obeying God's will, but failed in practice – the chief priests and elders. The first son stands for the apparent outcasts – the crowd and the tax-collectors and prostitutes who Jesus refers to later – who changed their minds and did obey God.

A small detail in the wording fine-tunes the application of the parable. The first son at first resisted, but then repented. The text explicitly states that the first son "changed his mind". But the second? The second commits himself to carrying out his father's will, but he did not "change his mind". His obedient-sounding reply is a lie, pure and simple. He never had any intention of fulfilling his father's wishes. Jesus's criticism of the religious leaders comes down to this: "You did not change your minds." True faith demands repentance in the light of truth, and they weren't willing to repent.

The priests and elders know what the people believe. They have recognised the crowd's devotion to John the Baptist. But, instead of revering him likewise, accepting that, in this case, the crowd is right, that John's baptism did come from heaven and that, as Jesus says later, he "came to you in the way of righteousness", they are suspicious, and will not change their minds despite all the evidence of John's authority and authenticity, of the truth that resided in him.

And the same is true in relation to Jesus Himself. Earlier in Matthew's gospel we read this: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things [the sermon on the mount], the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:29). Again, the crowds are right. And Jesus had also affirmed His own authority when He healed a paralytic in the presence of some scribes: "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he then said to the paralytic – 'Stand up, take up your bed and go to your home'" (Matt. 9:6).

So Jesus, while refusing to answer the question about His authority directly here, both had already had it answered by the crowd, and had already answered it Himself. And yet, despite all this, the chief priests and elders, who must have heard of all of this even if they hadn't experienced it first hand, refuse to change their minds. And, as we know, it is only a few chapters later that, consistent with the position they have adopted, they consign Jesus to death. They need to defend the institution at all costs and get rid of this threat.

Now, of course, there is a lesson here for those who appear to hold authority, and feel the need to defend their position and their institution even when they are shown to be clearly in the wrong. And this applies as much to the Church as to other organisations and institutions. The most obvious example in recent years has, of course, been the abuse which has gone on in the Church, and which church leaders covered up, feeling that their prime responsibility was to defend the institution even if that meant not just telling lies,

but living a lie. And it has only been the reaction of the victims, and then of ‘the crowd’ as it were – civil society and the media – exposing the abuse and the cover ups, that has begun to right the terrible wrongs that have been done.

So, we need to pray for and support particularly our bishops and others in authority in the Church, when they are tempted to defend the institution, even to lie on its behalf, instead of following the one to whom they have, in theory, pledged their allegiance, the one whose authority they claim to acknowledge. And we should recognise that this isn’t always easy, that these often aren’t straightforward ‘black and white’ issues, or at least don’t appear so at the outset. So, let’s hold them in prayer.

But then, of course, there is also a lesson for us here. We claim to be those who recognise the authority, the authenticity and the truth which resides in Jesus. We acknowledge easily enough the claim that Jesus made after His resurrection when He said to His disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). But, do we then live that out? Are we like the first son, ready to change our minds and do the will of our Father? In the epistle of James we read, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (1:22).

Or, in the rather more colourful language of Ezekiel in our first reading, with Ezekiel speaking on behalf of God: “Repent and turn away from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”

Both individually and collectively as Church here, we need to be aware of the possibility of living out a lie in our faith, being hearers but not doers of the word. We need to be aware that, sometimes, the crowd gets it right and sees authority, authenticity and truth before we do. And we need to be ready to change our minds, to repent or, as Ezekiel puts it, “Turn, then and live”.

Amen