

## Whose authority?

Readings Jeremiah 5:20 – 24, 30 – 31, Mark 11:27 - 33

Authority is almost a dirty word these days isn't it? As a child I remember the police as being worthy of respect. A policeman was someone strong. He was fair and just; honest and reliable. Between then and now things have changed. We have seen situations like the Arthur Allan Thomas case where false evidence was planted. Not only was Louise Nicholas raped but the trial of three policemen became her trial. The reputation of the police has been considerably soured to the point where some call them "the pigs."

I am not advocating that. Corruption and abuse by police are very public but our police are still among the least corrupt in the world. However, over the years, society's attitude to the police and to authority in general, has changed considerably.

In earlier generations, respect was automatically granted to people in roles of authority – police, judges, politicians, vicars. Now people in those roles have to earn respect. It won't be given as of right. This isn't all bad. We should think critically, in constructive ways, about how that authority is used. We should also think about our own authority. How do we use that authority in the roles we hold and as Christians?

Jesus Christ came to earth so the whole universe could be reconciled to God. The Lord has given us the authority to work with him in that. How and where we use that authority will be different for each of us. For some it is mostly within the church; for others mostly out in the community. Some are up front and others will minister behind the scenes. But we all need to claim Jesus' authority and not be daunted, or held back from God's plans for us, by the opinions of others or by false humility.

We ought to be walking in Jesus' authority; the authority he has delegated to each of us. Just take a moment to let that sink in. It might be a new thought for you. If you are a follower of Jesus, then he gives you the authority you need to carry out his plans for you.

The incident from Mark's Gospel is preceded by Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It is here he will fulfil his mission to die. Jesus enters as a King but a King riding, not on a horse as the Kings of the day did, but on a humble donkey. "Hosanna, hosanna", the people cry but we know that praise will turn to betrayal. The people praise him perhaps because they understand something of his Kingship. Or perhaps they just hope for the fulfilment of their own dreams.

Regardless of the people's praise, the religious lot only seem to care about their own place in society. They want to keep the authority they think they have.

Jesus is taking a stroll in the temple courts when the religious lot approach him. Perhaps their questions are genuine. More likely, they are trying to trip him up, again! They ask:

1. "By what authority are you doing these things?"
2. "Who gave you authority to do them?"

Jesus could have answered them plainly but he wanted them to see the absurdity of their underlying assumptions. Jesus often didn't give a simple answer did he? He

preferred to make people think for themselves. Jesus goes on to tell them a story in Chapter 12. It gives a fuller picture of just how deep the religious lot's suspicion of Jesus goes. I encourage you to read it for yourselves.

So he turns the tables on them, asking about John the Baptist's ministry. The people of the day were very clear about who authorised John's ministry. The apostle John writes "There was a man sent from God whose name was John."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus knows full well if the religious lot couldn't accept John's ministry of baptism they couldn't accept Jesus either. So Jesus challenges their underlying disrespect head on.

Jesus was baptised by John, though he was sinless. The religious lot had not been baptised by John. They didn't need to, did they? They were on the right track. They had it sorted thank you very much. They weren't sinners. Why should they be baptised and repent when they had nothing to repent of?

John had God's authority to baptise people who turn to the Lord with willing hearts. John was clear about the limits of his authority. "I baptize with water," he said, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."<sup>2</sup>

The next day John witnessed to Jesus, "I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."<sup>3</sup>

Many people believed God had sent John. If the religious lot said John wasn't from God; they'd be in trouble. People would lose respect for them and stop listening to them. Their mana; their authority would decrease. Unlike John, they couldn't cope with that!

So the devious lot hedge their bets. They wimp out, as Jesus suspected they would.

"You fence sitters," Jesus says. If you can't commit one way or the other, you don't deserve an answer. If you won't say whose authority John worked under, then I'm not talking to you about my authority either." Jesus knew they didn't accept that he too was from God, much less admit that on seeing him, they saw God himself.<sup>4</sup>

The religious lot weren't prepared to acknowledge Jesus' authority. Nor were they prepared to submit to that authority. They thought they had their own authority, based on their religious roles. So they kept trying it on.

I grew up with a single Mum. She wasn't very strict at all. I had lots of leeway – and I took advantage of that, pushing the few rules there were to the limit. One night I

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:7

<sup>2</sup> John 1:26

<sup>3</sup> John 1:34

<sup>4</sup> John 14:6 – 7 "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

came home way past check in time. The next morning my Mum said I wasn't to see the boy who had brought me home late again. I reacted with melodrama - spent the whole day in my room crying. I thought that my Mum would probably give in when she saw how upset I was. But she didn't give in. I remember secretly having a grudging sense of respect for her firmness. That didn't stop me trying it on in the future though. I thought I should be my own boss. Mostly I chose not to recognise my mother's authority.

The religious lot didn't recognise Jesus' authority either. Especially as all that Jesus did, he did because of the authority delegated to him by his Father. Here is how Jesus describes that authority:

Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Now listen to Jesus as he passes on his mission:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

The authority found in Jesus Christ is delegated to us. It is delegated to us to use wisely and lovingly.

There was a young second lieutenant in the States who went to buy a can of Coke from a vending machine near Fort Bragg where he was stationed. He discovered he had no coins in his pocket. No worries; he flagged down a passing private and asked him if he had a coin he could borrow. The private said cheerfully "I think so. Let me check."

The lieutenant drew himself up stiffly and said "Soldier, that's no way to address an officer. We'll start over again. Do you have a coin I could borrow for the vending machine?"

The private came to attention, saluted smartly and said "No Sir!"

The rulers of this world use their authority like a weapon to keep others in line. Jesus always used his authority in loving ways to set people free. Jesus is the Lion and he is also the Lamb. He delegates authority to us so we can lift others up, recognising the dignity that all people have because we are all made in God's image.

I got this next story from Tim Keller<sup>6</sup> who read about it in National Geographic: After a forest fire, a ranger came across a bird at the base of a tree. All that was left was a carbonised, petrified shell, covered in ashes. The ranger was grotted out and

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<sup>5</sup> John 5:19 – 20a

<sup>6</sup> King's Cross, Timothy Keller, 168-169

knocked the bird over with a stick. Out came three tiny chicks from under their mother's wings.<sup>7</sup> She had died protecting them.

Matthew, one of Jesus' followers, records Jesus' words as he viewed the city of Jerusalem. Jesus said "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Murderer of prophets! Killer of the ones who brought you God's news! How often I've ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you wouldn't let me."<sup>8</sup>

Can you hear the anguish in Jesus' voice? Jesus' love for them was so deep. He so wanted them to come and know the Father that he would give his life for them and us too. That is the authority of Jesus in action.

That verse comes in the midst of a tirade of judgement. Jesus is giving the religious lot what for. Their pretentious authority is paraded for their own glory. Their authority is not genuine because they don't love others more than they love themselves. Their authority is not from God at all. Jesus alone has the authority to judge them but that doesn't stop him loving them.

For many of us the concept of judgement is frightening and unclear. How do we understand God's love and mercy in the light of God's judgement? Passages like Jeremiah chapter five scare us. And so they should.

The Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, reproves his people for their sin while threatening judgement. Their sin is very great. They won't respect the Lord as creator and provider. They refuse to come under the Lord's justice and mistreat each other. The prophets and priests rule by their own authority rather than using their God-given authority and the people submit to that. They misunderstand authority and usurp it for themselves.

Any authority we have comes from the Lord. Jesus has given us the authority to witness to his love, to love others above ourselves. Over the last month, we have hosted Allan and Christine, Jo Rogers, Marion McChesney and the Corin family. To work for the Lord in places of danger requires an understanding of God-given authority – those missionaries know who they are in God and they understand the task God has called them to.

But so do we; at least to some degree. We know that we too are called to live out God's mission in the communities in which God has placed us. We are "Following Jesus; Building Community"<sup>9</sup>.

I've mentioned it before but I am very impressed with Antonio. As he works in Waimea College as a 24-7 youth worker he knows he is the church. He is the church in Waimea College. Each of us is the church wherever we find ourselves. As the church, we carry the authority of Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> I got this next story from Tim Keller who read about it in National Geographic:

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 23

<sup>9</sup> Church on the Hill's mission statement

When Jesus breathed on the disciples, he gave them his peace. He gave them authority to go out and share his love. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” He gave them authority to pronounce the forgiveness of sins.<sup>10</sup>

We too have that authority. We have authority to heal, to bind and release things in earth. We have authority to cast out evil spirits, to have our prayers answered, to hear God’s voice and share God’s word with others. Our authority must not be abusive, nor corrupt.

If our authority comes from Jesus, it will be respected and recognised. Because the authority that Jesus gives can be summed up in one word: love! Just as Jesus loves us, we have authority to share that love wherever we go. We are the Church, Christ’s Bride. The gates of hell shall not prevail against us.<sup>11</sup> When we take up the loving authority that Christ has given us, we are unbeatable.

Many of you knew Caroline Pitman, one of our beloved church members. It was a hard day on Wednesday when we held her funeral. One of the things I greatly admired about Caroline was her seemingly unshakeable confidence. She would tackle almost anything wouldn’t she? Always busy, committed and passionate about her Lord and about helping others. Her confidence was inspiring. Caroline could do the things she did because she knew who she was in Jesus Christ. She understood his authority and she understood that he had delegated his authority to her. She knew instinctively that Jesus was with her in everything she attempted for him.

Caroline was passionate about fundraising for the Lantern, the new community centre we so desperately need. She organised events and she gave generously. In lieu of flowers, the Pitman family asked for donations to the Community Centre. By Thursday those donations totalled over \$700. That is way more than the funeral directors had ever seen anyone donate to any cause at a funeral. Even in death, Caroline lovingly used the authority the Lord gave her.

Let’s take a moment to ask the Lord individually what aspect of his authority he wants us to take up. Where are we too timid? Where do we hold back for fear of others opinions? How can we better use the authority God has given us?

Let’s pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, as we get to know you more, we understand a little more about how your authority was always shown in love. Help us to understand what that authority means in our daily lives, as we go about your business with our family, friends, work mates and with strangers. Help us to trust you and to trust ourselves and to step out with boldness, when you command us to. Amen

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<sup>10</sup> John 20:21 - 23

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 16:18