

Sunday 4 October 2020

Good Morning all,

I have decided to resume sending out my sermons again as so few are attending church at the moment. It is actually quite safe as we sit so far apart. There are those who phoned me to enquire when the church is opening again as they are “longing to come back” but have not attended since we have opened.

The crisis of authority

Matthew 21:23-32

The word “authority” has many applications. A person who is an expert in a particular field is called an Authority. Another word for the government is always known as “authority”. There are authorities in religion and in all other fields as well. We can see Jesus taking authority when he drove out the merchants and money changers from the Temple. He acted out of a sense of moral outrage. We will see that there is more to Jesus than being a religious leader.

The cleansing of the temple followed by Jesus' teaching on the temple grounds outraged the priests and the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. The priests considered themselves to be the gate keepers of the temple. They claimed this authority from the Torah. When Jesus cleansed the temple they felt their authority had been undermined. The priests had a good business going. They themselves were not particularly religious. As it was Passover there was a lot of money passing around. They made sure they got more than their fair share. It was not always done in a very honest way.

The priests understood that their authority was not recognised by many in Israel. The Essenes a religious group were outraged that during the previous short termed independence when they were ruled by Jewish kings, that the king had claimed the right to be the High Priest as well. This was forbidden by the Torah. The Pharisees also were outraged by the corruption of Judaism by the Sadducees and priests in Jerusalem. There was also a challenge of the priests' authority by the Roman government who ruled over that area. The authority of the priest was in crisis. What Jesus had done in the cleansing of the Temple would have been very popular among certain groups of the Jews. The Sadducees felt they needed to confront the authority of Jesus.

The priests and the leaders came to Him and asked who had given Him the authority to cleanse the temple and then also to teach the people. In other words they wanted to know if he was qualified, did He have accreditation from the authorities to cleanse the Temple? They didn't think much of Jesus. Maybe they were trying to intimidate Jesus to shut Him up. If this was not possible they had to separate Him from the

people who thought He was a prophet.

Jesus was far too smart to be trapped. He answered the question with a question. "If you can tell me who gave the authority to John to baptise, I will tell you who gave me the authority." Little did they realise that they were talking to the Son of God. This led to another crisis. They didn't believe in John. John the Baptist was very popular. Many resented the establishment in Jerusalem which was in league with Herod who had had him executed. The priests and leaders could not answer where his authority came from. If they said from man they feared a revolt from the people, if they said from God it would show they didn't believe God. This shows how hollow the authority of the priests was. A few days later Jesus' authority would be shown. When He died on the cross the curtain protecting the Holy of Holies would be torn in two. When the temple was rebuilt after the exile in the time of Zerubbabel there was no Ark of the covenant to put into the Holy of the Holies as it had been lost. The Holy of Holies was a dark empty room. The Ark which represented the presence of The Lord was not there. All the splendour of the renovations that Herod had made to the Temple could not conceal how hollow the reality was. The Sadducees really had no legitimate authority at all. They were subject to both Rome and the Jewish people.

They could not answer that John was a prophet as they had publicly denounced him. To say that God had given John authority to baptise, the person who called them vipers, would only prove how right Jesus was to cleanse the temple. To affirm that the baptism of John as coming from God would have made them confess that they had not believed him, which means that they did not believe God who had sent him. Rather than dealing with the crisis by repenting, they decided that it was better not to answer at all.

Jesus answered them by saying that He would not tell by what authority He had done these things. He would not cast pearls before the swine. He tells another parable of two sons. The father tells his sons to go out and work in the vineyard. The Father has absolute authority over the household. Obedience was demanded. The first Son refused to go and work but later repented and went to work while the second son would go but didn't go. This action was not acceptable. The son who did not go to work should have been severely punished by the father. The father showed his absolute authority to be gracious to his previously lost son. The second son's conduct was even more outrageous than the first son who had initially refused.

Jesus explains the parable by saying that the first son who disobeyed and then repented represented the tax collectors and the prostitutes who had disobeyed the teachings of scripture. Their conduct was sinful and outrageous. They were in dire need of repentance. God is gracious to grant them repentance because that is His nature. There is no cure for the second son who represented the Sadducees and other religious authorities. They were in desperate need of repentance but were either too proud or self-righteous to repent. Therefore, the despised tax collectors and prostitutes who repented would get into the kingdom first. Unless the religious authorities

repented they would not enter at all.

We are confronted by the crisis of authority. The word “crisis” comes from the Greek word “Judgement”. Jesus is not only the Saviour. He is also given the authority to judge all people and all nations. There are many religions who cannot or will not say where Jesus gets his authority from. Some say that he had the authority of a teacher or religious philosopher. Some say Jesus is a pacifist who advocates a non violent means of overcoming evil. We have churches who use the authority of Jesus to rule roughshod over congregations. There are many who abuse the authority of Jesus for their own good.

So the real crisis of authority is centred in the person of Jesus Himself. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 28 that “All authority in heaven and earth” has been given to Him. Whether the authorities know it or not, they have no authority which does not come from Him. This means He has to be obeyed. This is especially true in the church, who claim to be His disciples. He calls us all to repentance and acceptance of His authority. Thankfully, Jesus who has authority over all is merciful and will receive all who come to Him in faith. We must believe that He is who says He is and will do as He says He will do.

In the work of fulfilling the Great Commission, we must present the authority of Jesus over time, space, matter and eternity. We must be motivated to evangelise the tax collectors and the prostitutes in our community. We can see them as having rejected the authority Of Jesus. Some of them have not accepted Jesus because of ignorance. They have not heard or understood the authority of Jesus. There is more hope for them than those who know who Jesus is and have rejected him. What horrendous danger they are in. The Holy Spirit tugs at these hearts and confirms the truth about Jesus and they still reject Him.

There are many who have heard and seen Jesus in what He says and does and have known in their hearts that He is the Son of God, and who have accepted Him and have eternal life. There is such a wonderful future of eternity for them. We need to continue to pray and evangelise the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Those who we have done our best to bring to Jesus and they still reject Him we must shake the dust off our feet and move on. John Wesley said go to those who need you the most.

Amen