

“Who cares about authority” Mat 21:23-32

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

Today we’ll focus our meditations upon questions about authority. Yes, about authority. What do you think, is this a good and trendy word in our society, or not? Authority. Yes? No?

Sure, it is difficult to generalize, but my guess would be that this is not one of good and trendy words. Good and trendy words are - our rights, our freedoms, equality, tolerance, autonomy, etc. And, of course, there is a lot of good behind these words, when they are correctly understood. But I think ‘authority’ isn’t one of them.

However, in our today’s Gospel reading this word ‘authority’ is what Jesus dialogue with the chief priests and the elders of the people was about. First, let’s take a look at their dialogue and then we can discuss implication for our lives.

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

These are very important questions. By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? You see, it is so interesting when we think about it. There can’t be a true authority unless it is given.

Authority comes with vocation. You receive certain authority when you receive certain vocation. That’s how authority functions. It is given. It means that everyone with authority is at the same time under someone’s authority.

The chief priests and the elders were people with authority. Both with spiritual authority and temporal. They clearly saw that there was a conflict of authorities between them and Jesus. Jesus was teaching things different than they. He was doing things differently and He obviously didn't submit to their authority.

Thus this question was inevitable. By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? They didn't, that's for sure, then who did it?

Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. This wasn't unusual in rabbinical debates to reply with a question. Jesus wasn't exactly evading to answer.

He was just refocusing to what was the central issue in this debate. **"The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"** 'From heaven' here simply means 'from God' as opposite to 'from man'.

It wasn't a tricky question. It was a simple question. Where did John's baptism come from? These two options really summarize what are possible sources for authority. God or man. The Creator or rebellious creatures.

As we can read in the Gospel, John clearly was chosen by God, he was called by God and sent by God. He came in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for the Lord. He preached repentance with God given authority and called people to turn away from their sins. Many believed his preaching, many accepted that he spoke with God given authority ... but not the leaders of Israel.

Now this question confronted them. Where did John's baptism come from? Jesus could have put it in different words. Where did John's authority come from? From God or from man. Answer me this and I'll tell you where my authority comes from. The leaders of Israel had a tough choice to make.

And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

Matthew describes their thought process well. Notice that they were not looking for right, meaning, for true answer. They already had their own views. They simply tried to come up with an answer which would help them in this dialogue.

They didn't focus on what was really important, that is, in whose authority John did what he did: as sent by God, or just on his own. Instead they tried to come up with something that would be rhetorically useful.

But what if John did come with God's authority? Why then did you not believe him? That would put them into corner. How could they justify themselves for not listening to God's messenger? How would it show them as Israel's leaders?

But, on the other hand, they couldn't say that John's authority was from man either, for people believed that John was a prophet, sent by God. So they made this wise decision and answered: "We don't know". **Then Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."**

It may appear that this dialogue ended without giving any specific answer regarding Jesus authority. But it is not so. For both witnesses of this event and for readers of Matthew's gospel this dialogue sends a very clear message.

John was sent by God to prepare the way for one who is much greater, and who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus was this one who came after John. He not just came sent by God, He Himself was God, the Son of God.

He came with His own authority. The highest authority possible, the true source of all authorities. Besides, Jesus Christ, the Son of God didn't came to use this authority for His own benefit, but for yours. With all His authority He wants to be your God, be with you and bless you. Each of you.

This dialogue is quite revealing. Sure, it tells a lot about the chief priests and the elders and about their priorities, but it also helps us to understand why and how people think and how they make their decisions and choices.

Today, as it always have been, there is a real struggle about authority in our society. Who has the highest authority? Who speaks the truth? Who defines who we are and what this world is about? Who sets guidelines for our lives? God, as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, or man, meaning - we ourselves?

Now think about this. The Church is here to tell the world who we are, what is wrong with us, and what God has done in Jesus Christ to set things right. We all are Jesus messengers. Each of you.

Every Christian is chosen by God and sent to the world, to share the good news about Jesus Christ.. It means that when we speak what we are sent to speak, we don't do in in our own authority.

As God's messengers we speak with His authority. Yes, when you speak what you are sent to speak you speak with God's authority. As if God Himself was speaking through you. It applies to each of you. That is such an honor and privilege, to be chosen to be God's child and also His messenger for the sake of others.

But what happens when we try to share the Gospel? When we tell people about the Creator, about the Fall, about all that Jesus did, His life, death and resurrection, about His return on the Last Day.

What is their reaction? If it is not straightforward denial, then usually people act like leaders of Israel. The truth is not important. They are not interested to find out whether our message is true or not, does it come from man or from God?

Much more important for them is the question of authority. Even if they don't realize it. Will it be my way or God's way? Can I do what I want, or do I need to be under someone's authority?

Unbelief and rejection of the Gospel is not an intellectual problem. People are not that foolish. They can understand God's message. The question is about the ultimate authority, about who will have it.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God or this world? This God the Creator or me? This is where true problem of unbelief lies. We want to be like gods ourselves. We want to have the highest authority over our lives.

This doesn't apply only to people outside of the Church. It applies also to us. To me and to you. How willing are we to admit that we all are under God's authority? How willing are we to listen to Him and to follow Him? Honestly?!

How often we want to have certain realms of our lives to be under our control, so that we can decide how to go about them? Let's take for example our relationships with God. How seriously do we take the first commandment?

Do we really trust that the most important for us is to be with our Creator and Redeemer? Aren't we much more interested in His gifts, in His blessings that come to us as our wellbeing? As long as we have His blessings, we don't need Him too much. When His blessings, our wellbeing is in danger in one way or another, then we run and seek for help.

How seriously do we take the third commandment? That we need to have a day of rest in God's presence, that we need to study His word. That there are things that our Creator and Redeemer wants to tell us and we need to hear them, they are so important.

How seriously do we take the six commandment? How do we treat the institute of marriage? This is one of contexts where these days we so often say, - let my will be done.

The seventh commandment - our possessions. Do we treat them as God's stewards treat God's possessions, or do we think that what belongs to God belongs to God, but what belongs to me belongs to me? That's only my business.

In all these situations this is about authority. Me or this God. We simply don't trust that living under God's authority can be better for us. We are afraid that this God will take away what is so dear to us, that under His authority we'll be less happy than ruling our lives ourselves.

This is sad, but accurate description of our perception. What can change it? There is only one solution. If we understand what kind of God Jesus Christ is. Our today's reading from Paul's epistle to Philippians can help us.

He, through whom all things are created, to whom all authority is given **“did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

He is God who care about you, more than about Himself. He is the Father, who provided and protects you daily. He is the Son, who became a man so that He can take upon Himself what your sins have merited for you. He is the Holy Spirit, who dwells with you, gives you true peace and joy and shapes you to be the best you possible.

When we know God as He reveals Himself in Jesus, only then our rebellious hearts can be changed and we are enabled to desire to be under God's authority. Only then we can trust that His will for us is what we truly need. Only then this word 'authority' become a good and trendy word for us. Something desirable.

Very often God's authority and the will of this world clashes. Very often we are caught in the middle of these clashes, and choosing to follow God's authority may seem to be a difficult path to venture.

But then we need to remember what kind of God your God is. That all authority has been given to Jesus. That He has emptied Himself for you. And that if He didn't spare His life for you, “how will he not also ... graciously give you all things?” (Rom 8:32)

Amen.