
By what Authority?

Matthew 21.23-32

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 28, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When people like to feel they're living in interesting times, they often refer to a sense of crisis. Today it's of the financial markets, or global warming, a year or two back it was international terrorism, before that it was the collapse of communism and way back before the freshman class were born it was the threat of global nuclear annihilation. But there's one crisis that's been going on for a good couple of hundred years or more. And that's a crisis of authority.

When I was in eighth grade my class had a particularly ineffectual teacher. Being cruel in the way that only eighth-graders know how to be cruel, every time he turned his back to write on the chalk board, we all used to edge our desks forward a few inches. Eventually the front row was only a couple of feet from him. Poor man, he was helpless. We had no respect for him. For the first time, right at that moment, I began to reflect on where authority comes from.

This is the question Jesus is asked in Matthew chapter 21. Throughout his gospel, Matthew portrays an alliance against Jesus, an alliance whose membership is constantly changing. At the beginning, in the wise men story, Herod calls the chief priests and scribes (Mt 2); early on, the conspiracy is conducted by the Pharisees alone (Mt 12); later, Jesus is approached by Pharisees and scribes (Mt 15); when Jesus predicts his arrest, he identifies his accusers as the elders along with the chief priests and scribes (Mt 16); earlier in this chapter it's the chief priests and scribes again, and later it's the chief priests and the Pharisees. Right here, in this conversation in the temple, it's the chief priests and the elders.

A casual reading might suggest these groups are interchangeable. But that would miss the point. The point is that these groups represent the conventional forms of established authority in ancient society. The chief priests represent the authority of birth, the scribes represent the authority of education, the Pharisees represent the authority of strict religious observance, the elders represent the authority of wealth and social connections. They come to Jesus and ask him "By what authority do you waltz into the Temple and overturn the tables and perform healings and make all this mayhem? Just who exactly do you think you are?" You need to realize they're assuming they're asking a question to which they themselves embody all the available answers.

The question of authority goes right to the heart of the gospel and right to the heart of society. In the middle ages, while money and social connections could give you power, there was no chronic crisis of authority. Since God was the unquestioned source of authority, God's representatives on earth had the highest authority. Meanwhile the Greeks and Romans were considered to be the only people who'd ever got civilization right, and so wisdom and institutions directly derived from the classical era were a source of authority complementary to the church.

The Reformation shook this consensus over authority because it shifted authority from institutions and individuals to a particular book, the Bible. Proclaiming the authority of scripture was supposed to unite everyone around a fixed and unchanging, even infallible point of authority. In fact, it had the opposite result. Once growing literacy and the printing press meant that everyone got to read it for themselves, it turned out they each came to drastically different conclusions about what it meant. Authority came to lie not so much in the book but in those regarded as the interpreters of the book. And so the Protestant churches ended up reinventing their own versions of the old authority structures they'd worked so hard to abolish. The trouble was, by now there were dozens of rival authority structures, which rather discredited the whole idea.

The old consensus over authority had gone. The period known as the Enlightenment, beginning around 1700, finished the job. The Enlightenment said authority lay not in ancient documents or venerable institutions or inspired leaders but in the heart of each individual. So the American and French revolutions invested authority not in God or in the church or in the Bible but in the people. They introduced a new religion, which said that the voice of the people was the voice of God.

And that's the moment when the age old *question* of authority turns into the very contemporary *crisis* of authority. Because now we don't just have rival squabbling authorities, we suddenly have something more *important* than authority, something called freedom. Freedom is what I feel seems right to me. Authority is what others believe is best for everyone. Freedom is the voice that comes from within me. Authority is the voice that comes from within others. But I only really trust the voice that comes from within me. When *your* authority seems to limit *my* freedom, I describe you as authoritarian. No one wants to be called authoritarian. And that shows that we value freedom more than we value authority. We have no final arbiter between our desires and the good of others. Which is why we have a crisis of authority.

So the crisis of authority is over two hundred years old. If Jesus were hanging out with the disciples in the public square today, the people who would question his authority wouldn't be Pharisees, elders, chief priests and scribes, they'd be more familiar faces. They'd be the shadowy multinational corporate executives, who stand to gain by shoehorning their candidate into the White House; they'd be the leading scientific minds of our universities, used to being the authorities on undisputed facts; they'd be the psychological experts, used to dealing with self-proclaimed messiahs with delusions of grandeur; they'd be media moguls, used to shaping public opinion by claiming simply to reflect it.

What these figures have in common is that they represent the two kinds of authority that emerged from this historical legacy and carry weight today. One's the authority of kinds force and the other's the authority of function.

The first one is really about power. Let's go back to my exasperated eighth-grade teacher for a moment. He'd clearly lost the moral power of persuasion. As our desks slid slowly towards him like an advancing army, he used to plead, with forced cheerfulness, "Okay now, you've had your fun, let's get down to work." But, to his horror, my teacher found the desks just kept advancing. The real question is, as every parent, teacher, police officer or failing despot knows deep inside, when the moral power of persuasion fails, can one turn to the physical power of coercion? Since corporal punishment went out of fashion, the tension in the classroom is always to see whether the teacher can maintain authority without any resort to physical intimidation. In the days when all political power was regarded as being held in trust from God, there seemed to be an authority that went beyond physical force. Today it's not so easy.

The second kind of authority is less about naked power and more about effective procedure. When someone lists a whole load of degrees after their name or offers you a resumé with a fistful of senior appointments, they're not using coercion, they're just telling you they're people who know how to run things, how to make things work, how to get the best out of other people, when to make a change and when to wait and see. When a company tells you it's proudly been making unwanted facial hair remover since 1957 or a meeting chair says "Let's now turn to item 4 on the agenda," the kind of authority involved is one that says "This is the best way to do things, this is really in everyone's interests, trust me, I've done this before, it'll work."

So these are the two kinds of authority most widely recognized today. On the one hand you have a *functional* authority, which rests on a proven record of making things work. On the other hand you have simple *force*, which has to be respected but only really comes into play when it's lost the argument.

What kind of authority does Jesus have? Well, we could say God's authority is fundamentally about *coercion*. We could say God made heaven and earth, and spins the universe on his finger like a Frisbee. God gives us life, God determines the moment of our death, and God chooses if we qualify for eternal life. That's power. And if we take that line Jesus' authority is rooted in his power. Just look at the miracles. Or alternatively we could say Christianity basically *works*. It encourages people to keep their promises, pay back their debts, stick with their families, honor their parents, and keep damaging feuds to a minimum. It's quite compatible with democracy, capitalism and the free market. Put the four together and you have a winner.

When people get angry about Christianity and/or the church, it's usually because they reject its authority on one of these two grounds. Either they say Christianity doesn't work, or they say Christianity is no more than a mask for coercion. When people say Christianity doesn't work, they refer to the failure of its descriptive power, in accounting for suffering or other faiths or the evidence of scientific enquiry; or they refer to the failure of its prescriptive power, in genuinely making better people or healing communities or bringing peace to the world.

When people say Christianity is no more than a mask for coercion, they tend to imply the Christian story is little more than a veneer of respectability painted over human ambition and the desire for control.

But maybe there's another kind of authority. Maybe there's a kind of authority that goes beyond the antagonism of naked power and the cynicism of established procedure. Maybe there's an authority that sometimes appears weak and even unpopular but will abide whether people follow it or not, an authority that has no need of manipulation because it has no interest in deceiving people, an authority that doesn't have to be articulate and stylish because it's just as well represented by the clumsy and the stumbling, an authority whose simplicity is transparency, whose identity is generosity, whose witness is its beauty. Maybe there's a kind of authority called the authority of truth. Jesus says "Believe in me not because you have to, not because it works, but because in me you've come face to face with truth." "Remember John the Baptist?" Jesus says to his accusers. "You never really knew who he was. But you knew that in him you'd met the truth. Smelly and angry as he was, much as you could have done without the locusts and the camel's hair shirt, now he's dead you realize he was the real deal."

Throughout the last two centuries there have always been Christians trying to get Jesus' authority onto firmer ground, looking for knockdown evidence, trying to show God's power by proving the miracles or trying to demonstrate Christianity's plausibility by grounding it on more fashionable forms of human knowledge. But these efforts will never come off. They rest on a mistaken notion of authority. Jesus comes to us as the truth. No more. And no less. We can't begin somewhere else, and somehow reason our way to Jesus. However we come to meet Jesus, when we come face to face with him, when he sees through us with his fully knowing yet utterly loving gaze, all other truth, all other knowledge, all other relationship, all other authority, has to step back into line behind this truth, this knowledge, this relationship, this authority. Whenever we ground the authority of Jesus on some other authority we make that other authority more fundamental than Jesus. There's *nothing* more fundamental than Jesus, and what God is doing in Jesus. That's what Jesus' authority means.

And this is the crucial point. If we rest in the authority of truth, the truth that meets us in Jesus makes us let go of the authority of effectiveness and coercion. Jesus has a way of doing things that challenges the time-honored procedures of worldly authority. Jesus has a power that runs counter to worldly power. If we've come to Jesus looking for an authority to underwrite the authority of coercion and effectiveness, we've come to the wrong place. The authority of Jesus doesn't much make things happen, doesn't always ensure things run smoothly, but it holds a distinct advantage over other authorities by being true. Coercion and effectiveness are what you fall back on once you stop believing Christianity is fundamentally true.

The people I look up to are the people who have the authority of truth. I think of a friend who never shouts, never exaggerates, never ingratiate, but simply lets her quiet yes be yes and her quiet no be no. I think of a politician who, when he realized he was wrong, said "When I realize I'm wrong, I change my mind – what do you do?" I think of a colleague who was deeply hurt by a friend and yet through his tears said, "I'm not going to let the bitterness of this injury determine the shape of my future life." I think of a woman who simply listens to people for as long as it takes for them to find the sense in their troubled lives. I think of an executive who stayed in his job under terrible pressure because he firmly believed he'd done nothing wrong and to resign would mean leaving the company in the hands of his unscrupulous employers. I think of a teacher who kept going in a failing school because he believed whatever it was these children needed, education had to be a big part of it. These are the people I look up to. They have no handle on coercion. They wouldn't pass any conventional test of effectiveness. But they have something more precious. They have the authority of truth. These people are Jesus for me.

What authority do you have? Are you admired, perhaps even feared, because you are powerful? Are you respected, perhaps even imitated, because you are effective and get the job done? Or do you have another kind of authority, which isn't about being in charge and isn't about getting things done, but rests on a confidence that God is fundamentally in charge and that in Jesus, God has done what fundamentally needs to be done? When others see you, do they see that authority? It may be quiet, it may be understated, it may be clumsy, it may be inarticulate, it may be stumbling, it may be a little unsure of itself. But in the end, it's the only authority that matters. It'll be around long after coercion and effectiveness have faded away. It's Jesus' authority. It's called the authority of truth.