

Questions and More Questions

Jesus had many friends and devout followers, and we also know that he had many enemies. Among those were important political and religious figures such as King Herod the Great, the Pharisees and scribes, and the chief priests and the elders. The political authority was in the hands of the Romans, who often ruled violently. Among the rulers were Pontius Pilate and his local leaders, and Herod the Great, as well as the Roman emperor Tiberius.

I want to give you some background because there is action before this text that I just read. Jesus had just come into Jerusalem on a donkey the day before and went straight to the temple. There he overturned the tables of the money changers, scattered the merchants, and caused a ruckus. The Jewish leaders were incensed at such shocking behavior. So, the next day when he returned to the temple, the chief priests and elders asked Jesus “By what authority are you doing these things?” They were really saying *Who are you to do such a thing, to overturn the tables of the money changers and to cause havoc at the temple?*

In this Matthew Gospel reading we are focusing on the chief priests and the elders, and all the questions--their questions and Jesus’ questions to them. In many ways this dialogue is about leadership positions and the authority a person has.

What **was** Jesus’ authority? Jesus didn’t answer the question, which was his usual pattern. In fact, he returns that with another question about the origin of John the Baptizer’s baptism--was it from heaven or by humans? The chief priests and elders weighed their options. If they were to say by heaven, they would be vulnerable and lose their sense of wisdom and authority; if by human origin, they might incite a riot because people felt that John was a prophet, and many followed him and repented of their sins. Instead, they said “we do not know.”

Because the chief priests and the elders had leadership positions dealing with matters of religion and civic duty, they took the initiative to question Jesus’ authority. They challenged him and they themselves feel challenged. According to Jesus, they were arrogant and self-serving. Their interpretation of the law disregarded the weak, the hungry, the widows and all others who needed help in Jewish society. These were the very people Jesus sought to protect and love. These leaders were incapable of having compassion.

In the case of the money changers, it was likely that they were cheating the poor who came to exchange their coins for Temple coins. People had to convert to Temple currency to pay taxes or buy animals for sacrifice. Jesus felt enraged. He said the Temple was a place of prayer not a place of commerce. He called it a “den of thieves.” The buying and selling and cheating especially affected women and the poor. Also, commerce was an obstacle to those who came to the temple to pray. Imagine having booths in All Saints hallways when people are praying at the Eucharist! The focus was to be on God and the Kingdom of Heaven.

What **was** Jesus’ authority? He was called a rabbi. We know that. Jesus had studied the scriptures and was fully knowledgeable about Torah, the law and teachings of the Israelites. Being a rabbi gave him a certain amount of earthly authority to teach and preach. Jesus’ true authority was divine authority, coming from his heavenly Father, just as that of John the Baptist.

John’s fiery message inspired people to repent and turn to God, and the tax collectors and prostitutes believed, therefore, Jesus said, they would go before the religious leaders into the Kingdom of Heaven. By rejecting John the Baptist, the leaders were likewise rejecting Jesus, the Son of God.

“What do you think? I like Jesus’ diplomatic question to the priests and elders. It sounds like a simple invitation to dialogue and to give an opinion, but it wasn’t. Jesus then tells a short parable of the two sons who are asked by their father to go work in the vineyard.

Which son did the will of their father was the next question? Well, the leaders **did** give an answer. The one who said *no* then went anyway. The other said *yes* but defied his father by not going. It’s possible we too might identify with the sons. Do you remember a time when you were asked to do an important task and said *yes* and then didn’t comply? Or, you might have said *no* and had a change of heart and mind and complied after all?

I ask you “what do you think; that is, about questioning Jesus? Have you prayed to God about a certain problem and not gotten an answer? Did you pray for healing? Or, guidance to take job 1 or job 2? Or, maybe who to marry? How often do we profess our faith in God and never do the hard work of prayer needed to follow Jesus? In my experience, God does answer. It may not be directly or what we had hoped for. It may take a long time even with unceasing prayer, but he answers. Be assured that we are guided by the Holy Spirit.

When do the questions end in this Gospel? Later in Matthew we have another question-and-answer session that is crucial. The Pharisees, who sometimes joined with the chief priests and elders, asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment among the Jewish laws and traditions. While they debated, Jesus gave the answer.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt 22:37-40). That’s the authority of scriptures, God’s laws. Jesus is adept at clarifying God’s will, whether it be with the chief priests and elders or the will of the father in the vineyard parable of the two sons.

Today we are not only invited to value these two commandments, but to make them part of our daily lives—love God and love your neighbor! These are crucial to living a true Christian life. End of questions!

However, I can’t help but mention that on October 4 in the church calendar, we celebrate the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, one of the great saints. At one point, Francis disowned his earthly father because of all the controversy around Francis’ insisting on rebuilding the church with money he took from his father’s fabric store. He said God in heaven was his only father, therefore submitting to the authority of God and forsaking all human authority.

Amen

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All Saints Episcopal Church

Proper 21, Year A

Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16, Philippians 2: 1-13

Matthew 21: 23-32