

## “With Authority”

Liturgical Date: Proper 21 A

Primary Text: St. Matthew 21:23-27

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 21. The title of the sermon is “With Authority”.

Authority. That is an interesting word to think about today. Now of course, some people have authority based on a position that they have been chosen for. You have a boss at work. Likely they have that position because they interviewed for it and were chosen or were named to it by a boss higher up the chain than them. A teacher has authority in their classroom. They have been hired by a principal and school board and given a measure of authority over a certain class. A political leader in our country is elected by the voters and sworn into a position of authority. A police officer has the authority to give commands and arrest people because they have a badge and have been sworn in. And we could go on.

But authority is more than that isn't it? Some people just seem to have authority, even if they have not gone through some formalized process. When a basketball player makes a strong dunk the announcer may say, “And they put that one home with authority.” We have certain people that are our “go-tos” when we need a question answered or directions on how to do something. Some leaders just seem to have an “it” factor. They have a presence. People will listen to them and follow them. Yes, authority has more to do than simply being in a formal position.

This brings us to Jesus and our Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 21. Looking at Jesus from a human standpoint, He had little formal authority. He is called a “rabbi” or “teacher”, but He had not been through a formalized seminary education. Jesus did not have special sheets of paper hanging on His wall

indicating degrees conferred. His family was not well connected with the powers that be. Jesus was the eldest son of a carpenter from a town far from the power centers of Israel. He held no official position in the temple or on the Sanhedrin Council. Jesus was never elected to nor appointed to any political office. He had disciples, but not employees. This “King of Kings” who was greeted not long before today’s passage on the first Palm Sunday, had no land that he ruled, no army that he commanded, and no golden crown adorned with precious jewels. Thus, for people looking at Jesus from an earthly standpoint, He would seem to have little authority.

But He had authority, didn’t He? Even His opponents knew it. When Jesus spoke, people listened. As the Sermon on the Mount ended, the Bible tells us, *“And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at His teaching. For he taught them as one having **authority**, and not as the scribes.”* (Matthew 7:28-29) He backed up His words with incredible miracles that defied the laws of nature: feeding thousands with a few fish and loaves of bread, healing people that had suffered long with ailments and disabilities, calming storms, and casting out demons. None of this made sense to His opponents.

When He showed up at the temple during Holy Week after being cheered and welcomed by the crowds and then chasing the money changers out, the chief priests and elders asked him, *“By what authority doest thou these things? And who gave thee this authority.”* Essentially, they are thinking, “This guy is not one of us. How dare he act as he has authority. Who does this guy think that he is?” And Jesus, being Jesus, is on to them. His opponents had constantly tried to trap Him with questions and paint Him into a corner. He knows that they seek not an honest answer, but one that they can use against Him to destroy Him.

Jesus responds with a question of His own for them. He says that He will answer their question on where His authority comes from if they will answer His question. Verse 25 records Jesus' counter-question, "*The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven, or of men?*" His opponents don't like this question. They don't want to answer it because it puts them in a difficult position.

They council among themselves. They know they are in a no-win situation. If they say that John the Baptist had authority from heaven, then they will be admitting that the things that John spoke were true and had authority. This is a problem for them because John the Baptist was preaching and pointing to Jesus as the "Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world." He had prepared the way for Jesus. This same Jesus that was a problem for them and that they were trying to silence and get rid of. By admitting that John had authority from heaven, they understand that they would be the ones trapped, not Jesus. What they wanted to say was that John's baptism, his authority, was from men. Then John and the one that he pointed to, Jesus of Nazareth, could be ignored. His message would not be from God, but the musings of a strange looking and acting man. That is what they wanted to answer, but they didn't because they were clever enough to know that people considered John a prophet. Now Jesus has them choosing between a rock and a hard place. Once again, this itinerant preacher had turned the tables on them.

What do they do? They take the oldest out, one that has been used again and again throughout history. They say they do not know, "*We cannot tell*", they say. They refuse to answer the question, feigning ignorance. It is a political move. They can't say that John has authority from God, because that undercuts their case against Jesus. But they will be opposed by the people who rightly understand that while John the Baptist did not hold earthly positions of authority, that he was a man that spoke for God.

And what does Jesus then say in the final verses of our reading? *“Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.”* Once again, Jesus has gained the upper hand. Once again, He has escaped their trap. Once again, He has turned the tables, and they are now the ones trapped. And it frustrated them so. And by the end of the week, it will seem that they finally get the best of Jesus and silence Him. They will have Jesus arrested on false charges and condemned by false witnesses. They will convince the Romans to execute Him. They will turn the crowds from “Hosanna” to “Crucify Him.”

But we know that this was all part of God’s plan. Jesus had to die. He had to die to save humanity from sin. The cross was the mission of Jesus from the beginning. But it would only happen in accordance with the will and timing of God. The scribes and Pharisees saw this as their victory, but in reality, it was Jesus winning. They could only exercise authority to the extent that God allowed it. And what they saw as victory was hollow and temporary. Because even death could not hold Jesus. The stone in front of the rock-hewn tomb would be moved. Jesus would emerge alive. And they still tried to discredit Him, claiming the disciples stole the body. But it didn’t work. The message and mission of Jesus would be preached all throughout the world and many would believe. Sin and death would be defeated.

Of course, Jesus knew, as do we that follow Him today that John’s authority came from heaven. John the Baptist was a true prophet of God, He spoke God’s word to the people. As did Jesus. This very question had been asked by the people of his own hometown in Chapter 13 as well. And the answer is the same. He did have authority. It was not an authority conferred by powerful men, but an all-powerful God. As Jesus said in the last chapter of Matthew after His resurrection, *“All power is given unto me in heaven and earth.”* His Father had given Him this authority. No hiring process was needed. No aptitude test needed to be

administered. No credit hours needed to be earned and degree issued. No earthly king or political leader needed to appoint Him. Because His authority came from the Father God and Jesus Himself is God, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. Of course, He could teach and crowds would listen. Of course, He could command storms, diseases, and demons to depart. Because He had authority, the greatest authority.

And He still does today. We await the return of Jesus as judge and king on the Last Day. But He is already reigning. When He ascended into heaven, He took His rightful place at the right hand of the Father. The right hand is the place of favor and authority. From thence He rules the entire universe and over His people, the Church. And for those who have repented of their sins and received saving faith, we join Him. We enter the throne room. As Jesus intercedes for us, we are forgiven and welcomed into God's eternal kingdom. The chief priests and elders wanted to silence and trap Jesus, but in the end, it was He would silence them and release us from the trap of sin, death and the devil. Jesus has the authority from heaven. In fact, He is the authority. And thanks be to God that the ultimate authority is good, gracious, merciful, and loving toward us undeserving subjects. In this, we rejoice in the authority of the one Triune God.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.