

Sunday: Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 27, 2020

Text: Matthew 21:23-27

Title: Question Authority?

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

As we hear certain passages from the Scriptures, it is sometimes difficult to separate the meaning and application of a text to the people involved in the original encounter from the application of the text in light of our knowing the whole story of Christ crucified, raised and ascended.

Our Gospel reading today is one of those texts. Jesus encounter with the chief priests, scribes, and elders in Jerusalem, who question his authority, is found in all three synoptic Gospels. By its inclusion in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the timing of the exchange implies that there is something significant going on here.

Our text today picks up after Jesus has entered Jerusalem. On the first day of the week leading up to the Passover celebration, Jesus was welcomed and cheered on by crowds of people who lined the road, laid down cloaks and branches on the road, and lauded Him as the “Son of David,” shouting “Hosanna in the highest.” Matthew writes,

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.” (Matthew 21:10-11).

They were right, Jesus is a prophet, but he is more, so much more. The religious leaders in Jerusalem were greatly distressed by the welcome Jesus received. They were well aware of his miracles and his teachings. His message of the coming kingdom was distressing to them to say the least.

After his entry into the city, “Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons” (Matthew 21:12).

Disruption of the business side of the temple cultus was extremely disturbing. As the religious elite reeled from his actions, they saw people flocking to Jesus. Matthew continues,

“The blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant” (21:15).

As Jesus returned to the temple the next day to teach, he was met by the chief priests and elders of the people. They were desperate to regain their positions of power and authority over the people. They needed a way to discredit Jesus. In that way they would be seen as greater than the alleged prophet from Nazareth.

Approaching Jesus as he entered the temple, his adversaries look to box him in. They ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”

In Jewish culture, a rabbi or teacher, derived his authority through the man who was his teacher. We see this in Acts 22:3 as Paul speaks of his credentials as a Jew

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.

To discredit a teacher, the religious leaders would seek to undermine his authority by challenging from whom he received his training. The chief priests were using this ploy to discredit Jesus.

As we hear the question and Jesus’ response, we often view this exchange as Jesus silencing his opponents with a brilliant rhetorical move. I will answer your question if you answer mine. This is a valid way of looking at this exchange and is affirmed by how the chief priests responded.

Without answering Jesus’ question, they withdrew and began to discuss the matter among themselves. Jesus’ question, “The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”

We are given a glimpse of the turmoil this question caused these leaders. On the one hand if they say from heaven, then they will have to explain why they rejected John’s baptism. If on the other hand they say from man, they would have

to deal with the crowds who recognized John as a prophet. These men were faced with an extremely difficult dilemma.

When the scriptures say these leaders feared the crowds, it is unlikely that their fear was a physical fear but was a fear of being marginalized or in losing face. They were religious leaders. They had spent years getting to the places of authority they held. To lose their ability to influence the temple visitors would be devastating.

After discussing the question posed by Jesus, the chief priests and elders respond that they do not know. In their effort to save face, they demonstrate their lack of wisdom and knowledge. Though they avoided answering Jesus' question, that was the only question unanswered in the exchange. Jesus had in fact answered their question.

As Jesus points to the baptism of John, he connects his ministry with the activities of the man he refers to as the greatest prophet, greater than Elijah. John and Jesus are inextricably linked together. Isaiah points to John

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

John, Jesus' cousin, was set aside before birth to be the prophet to point to the Messiah as he took on human flesh. John was raised by his parents in accordance with the directions given Zechariah by the angel in the temple. He was filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb. He turned many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he went before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, calling people to repentance.

It is John who anointed Jesus as the Messiah as he baptized him in the Jordan River, as the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in

bodily form, like a dove, as God spoke from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

It was John who pointed to Jesus identifying him as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. The authority given to John in his work of baptism points directly to the authority of the baptized Christ.

In Jesus’ response to the chief priests and elders, he actually answered their question. For the correct answer to his question is the answer to their question. His authority came from heaven, just as the baptism of John was of heaven. Jesus authority is from God.

The source of Jesus authority was repeatedly revealed in his ministry. In the miracles of healing we see the power of God poured out on Jesus, then given to broken humankind. The evil spirits recognized the authority of Jesus as they identified him as the Son of God. Jesus’ power over the demons reflects his authority over all of creation.

That brings us to the good news in today’s gospel reading. As the source, and authority of Jesus derives from God the Father, as the only Son, he is the fulfillment of the promises of God to Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David and to you and me. Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah. He is the Savior and restorer of mankind.

The authority of Jesus, established in the scripture and in the flesh, is the basis for our hope. This Jesus is true God and true man. As we confess this in our creeds, including the Nicene Creed that we will speak together in a few minutes. In Luther’s explanation to the second article of the Apostles’ Creed we read,

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

As the Son of God, vested with all authority, Jesus gave his life on the cross for you and me. He willingly walked the road to Golgotha and allowed himself to be

crucified. His sacrifice paid the price for our sins. He bore the wrath of God, the wrath that we deserve for our sins.

In John's Gospel during the week before his death,

Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:44-46).

Jesus authority, given to him by the Father, is good news for you and for me. As the Son of the Father, and as part of the Godhead, his authority makes his sacrifice on the cross effective in redeeming us from our fallen, sinful condition. Without the authority he holds, the cross would be meaningless. But since he is true God and true man, his sacrifice on the cross accomplishes all that God promised to do for mankind. When his work on earth was finished, Jesus passed authority on to his followers.

He shared his authority with his disciples as he commissioned them to be his messengers to the world. From generation to generation, all who believe in Jesus are saved by the faith given them. Believing in Jesus is believing in the one who sent him; the one who imbued him with authority. The authority of Jesus, the sinless Son of the Almighty Father is effective still today. It is what makes our sacraments effective for salvation. In Baptism we are cleansed of all unrighteousness and made heirs of the kingdom of heaven, by the authority of Jesus and by the Word. In Holy Communion, we are forgiven by the very body and blood of Christ the very same body that bears the authority of God the Father and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

In the precious gift of faith, we are beneficiaries of the authority of Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer.

Amen.