

17th Sunday in Pentecost 2020

Readings - Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 78:1-4,12-16, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

Introduction - Authority has existed since the days of the garden and Adam and Eve. The first human couple is commanded to have 'dominion' over the earth. Authority can be invested through tradition and power, as in the case of monarchs and strong ruling families. Authority can be invested by societies and organizations, as in the case of universities imparting degrees and government councils being elected. Authority can also come from personality and charisma of individuals to draw large followings of people.

Common Theme - How does one acquire authority? It remains important to know from where we derive our authority. Too often a dissident movement within the Church moves to set up 'its own church' giving themselves self-appointed authority. Conversely, those in authority can sometimes quench mission opportunity, callings within the community, even the work of the Spirit in an effort to maintain their sense of authority.

Hebraic Perspective - The foundation of religious authority in Judaism rests upon the will of the Almighty. Against this, there can be no possible higher authority. God's authority is absolute and is encapsulated in His Kingship within the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven exists wherever God is ruling and reigning in the lives of people. God's will is revealed and expressed in the pages of Scripture, notably but not exclusively the Torah. Those who teach the Torah therefore, in a sense, speak in God's Name. Consequently, diligence must be conducted by those who profess to teach the Word of God. James 3 notes a severe punishment reserved for false teachers.

Reading #1; Exodus 17:1-7 - Moses was the leader of the Israelites by Divine appointment. Authority, both spiritual and temporal, had not come through a democratic process. In actuality, Moses had been chosen by God in Midian. Thus to challenge the authority of Moses was in essence to potentially challenge the authority of God. Despite the hardship the people endure in thirsting for water, which is legitimate, the people challenged the wisdom and authority of Moses through their complaint. In so doing they also challenged the authority of God in His appointment of Moses. The authority of Moses and his leadership decisions in the desert are actually confirmed through the miracle of the water from the rock. God is also thereby vindicated in His choice of Moses as shepherd.

Reading #2; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 - The Psalmist requires us to really hear the words of the Lord. Why should we be attentive to what God has to say? Simply because he is God? The Psalmist tells us that there are more reasons than that. God's authority to transmit wisdom and mysteries from ancient times stems from His praiseworthy deeds and actions of wonder, particularly His miracles performed during the Exodus. God's mark of authority is visible to all through His deeds of wonder and power. Who can part a sea?

Reading #3: Philippians 2:1-13 - Paul appears to be quoting a very early creed or hymn already in existence within the Church community. Paul urges the community to have the same

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mindset of relationships with each other that Jesus has with His Father. Jesus has a unique understanding of the authority of His Father. It wasn't that Jesus was trying to be equal to his Father, He already possessed that quality, rather in His mission of redemption Jesus accepted His Father's authority to send Him. His submission to the authority of God resulted in His receiving authority from God. As Paul says, he is 'exalted to the highest place'.

Reading #4; Matthew 21:23-32 - The authority of Jesus to teach being called into question occurs in all the Synoptic Gospels, following the cleansing of the Temple. It does not occur in John, although the scouring of the Temple does. The cleansing of the Temple would have been a serious and public challenge to the Temple leadership. They had been powerless to stop it. Jesus was too popular to arrest. In this encounter, the chief priests, most likely the Sadducees, confront Jesus on authority. They are outmaneuvered by the question regarding the authority of John the Baptist. In so doing, Jesus shows that the Sanhedrin were unqualified to question His authority.

Hebraic Context - Responding to a question with a question, sometimes called Socratic after the Greek philosopher Socrates, is a common teaching method in Rabbinic circles. It is most likely that Jesus did not study with a Rabbi, rather this method of teaching was so prevalent in the late 2nd Temple Period that it naturally became a part of Jesus' teaching style. Jesus responds to a question from the Sadducees with his own question, alluding to John the Baptist's popularity as a prophet among the people. In doing so he also cleverly hints to His own prophetic status. The authority of prophets comes from God. Thus if John was indeed the final prophet, that is the Elijah figure in messianic tradition who prepares the way for the Messiah, this would beg the next question (and thereby teach) who was Jesus? Hence Jesus' question, or the answer to it, was a veiled hint at His own messiahship.