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FROM A RURAL PULPIT

A question of authority

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an example of ‘standing theology’ as distinguished from sitting theology and kneeling theology. This sermon was given at a service of Holy Eucharist on 27 September 2020 in St Mary’s Church, Menai Bridge, Anglesey. This was the third consecutive Sunday of the church being open for services since the first lockdown. The Gospel reading was Matthew 21: 23-32.

KEYWORDS

Standing theology, preaching, rural, authority, conscience, freedom of speech

We know Matthew’s Gospel well enough to realise that the question being posed to Jesus is fraught with danger. Jesus is now in the Temple in Jerusalem, and it is the turn of the chief priests and the elders to challenge him, covertly. This is their patch, and they ask Jesus:

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?

There is so much caught up in that question; you can sense the snares lying in wait for Jesus’ answer.

Jesus is no fool; he refuses to play their entrapment game. Instead, Jesus poses a question to them – if they answer *his* question, then he will answer *their* question too. Jesus turns the argument away from himself and focuses on John the Baptist. He asks:

Did John’s baptism come from heaven or was it of human origin?

The response of the chief priests and the elders is most interesting because, in their response, Jesus reveals the problematic nature of such questions about authority. In this case, the chief priests and the elders realise that whatever their answer, it will cause them trouble. If they say that John’s baptism came from God, they will be shown to be hypocrites because they did not believe him. But, if they say that John’s baptism was of human origin, they will then be in danger of upsetting the crowd who see John as a prophet. So, they refuse to answer Jesus.

Giving truthful answers is difficult, especially if you are primarily worried about how you look or how you can secure the best social and political position for your own protection or advancement.

This brief but intense gospel exchange speaks powerfully into our lives in the Western world today. Questions about authority and how we respond have never been more relevant, and they bear the distinctive marks of our age.

We have never had access to so many sources of authority from every imaginable place. However, coming with the many positive contributions of this Information or Digital Age, there are also sharp and problematic questions about authority. Evaluating the meaning and the value of these respective claims would be an enormous undertaking, but it's not just that.

Something is changing, fundamentally. We are losing our ability to navigate skilfully through what feels like an endless ocean. We are being carried on whatever wave comes along next. Just like the Gospel reading, we are all being challenged by questions about authority. And we are being put to the test more often than we realise.

Today, many people have real dilemmas, which affect what they say and do. Today, it's more like: if I say this or do this, will I lose my job or my position, or will my social world collapse, because I believe strongly about this particular matter? (And lines are becoming very blurred between private and public life.) Today, the question of authority is more often about what will make the company, the institution or whatever it is look bad, rather than what is reasonable and fair in a democratic and open society.

These are troubling times. How can the Christian Church say anything truly transformational in this climate?

I believe that the Church must dig deep into its own tradition to remember and to share its knowledge and experience of navigating the perils of the ocean. And, more importantly, actually to live it explicitly in the world.

The Church needs to remember that traditional word, *conscience* – that thing inside that interrupts us and can be so troublesome at times. *Conscience* is God-given to every human being, and the *conscience* of every human being is different and unique – that's why we don't all agree on things even when we are being authentic. But God is at work in each case. *Conscience* reminds us of what is important to us and is closely related to our values; it is shaped by our own experiences and uniqueness. It is like a basic guide when we are in danger of going off course. It should stop us long enough to take more care in our discernment of a situation. *Conscience*, though, gives no easy answers, and it naturally challenges others as well as the person themselves. *Conscience* plays a central and necessary part in our spiritual growth – if we ignore it or fail to take it seriously enough, we risk great damage to ourselves spiritually. However, if we are attuned to recognising our conscience clearly, it can be a reliable guiding presence in our lives.

So, returning to that question of authority, and those dilemmas we all face, particularly today. People's *consciences* can thrive where freedom of speech truly exists with real spaces for open and respectful encounters with the other – this must be open to *all* though (regardless of

our personal feelings). It is only in authentic encounters with the other that we can spiritually grow. Otherwise, the *conscience* is choked as people are forced to live hidden lives / half lives, while one or two brave souls stand up every now and again and say:

“This is not right.”

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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