

Reflection for Trinity 17. Matthew 21: 23-32

Mr Bumble the Beadle carried his staff of office, others wear peaked caps, the bus inspector, the park keeper, the police officer his helmet. All symbols of authority, permission to act on behalf of those in power. In our television dramas Vera flashes her warrant card, her identification, and her authority. Do police officers really do this? A more up to date version of an authority symbol is the card, laminated in plastic, dangling on a lanyard around the neck. We live in a society which questions authority more than ever. Children used to do what an adult told them, now they question the right of an adult to tell them what to do. Everyone questions what right people have to tell them what to do. 'We want our freedom, you cannot tell us what to do!' they exclaim.

First century Jewish society was, in contrast, a very ordered and regulated existence. The priests and scribes interpreted the law and added bits to maintain a tight hold on people. There were laws on food, cooking, hygiene and all manner of things. Everything in life was very strictly regulated. Preaching and teaching was the province of the established order. Those in authority were very much disturbed by the appearance of firstly John the Baptist, preaching a baptism of repentance and calling to account the hypocrisy of those in authority. 'You brood of vipers', he called them. John was at least a way off in Galilee but then Jesus comes sharing a gospel of love and forgiveness, healing the sick and teaching. Jesus is popular and is being followed by many which is so disconcerting for the hierarchy. Jesus has no credentials, no Bishop's licence, no permission to officiate. So, they come to question Jesus. 'By whose authority are you doing this?' they ask, but once again Jesus answers their question with another question which they cannot answer without incriminating themselves.

It all hangs on this question of authority - is it human authority or authority from God? Jesus has shown His natural authority. As Jesus begins His public ministry everyone is astounded at His authority. The disciples follow Him without question. People marvel at His teaching, it is said that He teaches with authority. It is clear that Jesus has authority, He has no need to prove it or have certificates or qualifications. His authority comes from God and is apparent to those who meet Him.

We accept that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is from God, not *was* from God but *is* from God. The Church throughout its history has struggled to maintain orthodoxy - whichever orthodoxy was current at the time, often by violent and bloody means. Maybe we are right to question and to challenge earthly authority. As followers of Christ, as disciples of Christ, we must be open to all, open to those who worship differently to us and maybe to accept that the way we worship, the way we have worshiped for so long, may be evolving. We must be open to the possibility of change but, above all, to remember that it is God at the centre and must remain so.

*Merciful God,
You sent Your Son, Jesus Christ,
to show us a different way to live—
the way of deep humility and obedience.
You've called us to love one another,
and to work together with one heart and mind,
balancing our needs with the needs of those around us.
Give us courage to follow faithfully, and with integrity—
with actions that bear witness to the words we speak,
and worship that overflows into our daily tasks and relationships—
so that our lives will bring glory and honour to You,
our Redeemer and Lord.
Amen.*