

Sermon Archive 168

Sunday 1 October, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 21: 23-32

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Within the Presbyterian system, whenever a new parish ministry begins, the regional administrative body of the Church gathers to worship God, and to declare formally the minister's appointment. I referred to one of these services in a sermon last December - talking about the power of the public profession of faith. Back then I said that induction services are happy occasions - full of hope and joy. And they are. Because quite a lot of new ministries have begun in Christchurch lately, I've become something of an induction junkie. So much so, that I'm beginning to notice regular patterns - one of which is the presence of laughter. And I guess it makes sense. Laughter is often a part of human celebration, and inductions are certainly celebrations. Laughter is also quite often an accompaniment to relief. And inductions are always a relief, following often protracted times of uncertainty about the future. The presence of laughter, then, seems all quite congruous. But one particular peal of laughter seems to me a little strange. It regularly follows the reading of something called "the formula". The formula is a statement, signed by the incoming minister, acknowledging that she or he recognises the authority under which she or he ministers. Noting at the formula's start the importance of the Church's supreme and subordinate standards, the formula finishes like this:

I accept that liberty of conviction is recognised in this Church but only on such points as do not enter into the fundamental doctrines of Christian faith contained in the Scriptures and subordinate standards. I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God and promise to submit to it.

Cue laughter. Every time. Why do we laugh? The formula is saying that we are people under authority, answerable for what we say and do. It speaks about the possibility that things might become difficult when we're exercising conscience under immediate authority that troubles the conscience. And as the final verb in the sentence is "submit", it foreshadows the potential costliness of riding the line between conscience and authority. When push comes to shove, authority will

seek you out, requiring submission. Perhaps we laugh not because it's funny. Perhaps we laugh because it makes us nervous - the challenge of living truly, under authority.

We all live under authority. As citizens of a nation, we're under the authority of a government. Its laws bind us, shape our conduct. We drive on the left hand side of the road (usually). We pay or taxes (usually). In the main, it, isn't all that complicated. We comply and cooperate. And when we're found to have driven on the **right** side of the road, or to have **evaded** our taxes, we say "fair cop guvnor, off to punishment we go". There's no serious clash of wills, no fundamental disagreement.

The complications arise when conscience is pricked - when it feels like a higher authority may be calling.

In keeping with the exercising of its proper authority, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, met to do its business. Included in the business was the matter of the Church's position on marriage equality. Were ministers to be prohibited from conducting same-sex weddings, or was it to remain a matter of liberty of conscience? Some of the speeches made during the debate were about sexuality. Some were about just and equal treatment of people. Others were about liberty of conscience. Before the vote was put, a large group (comprising both conservatives and liberals) begged the Assembly not to put the motion. When it became clear that the motion **was** to be put, that large group of diversely-believing people, walked out of the room. The vote was put; the prohibition was carried by a narrow margin; the numbers were recorded. The authority, to which all office-bearers had agreed to submit, had been exercised.

Back here in Christchurch, things got complicated. The Council of Knox Church felt like conscience was awakening. Yes, we had declared the Presbyterian form of government agreeable to the Word of God. Yes, we had said that when push came to shove, we would submit to it. But it began to feel that an act of submission in this case would be a failure of conscience before another authority that was emerging - and feeling higher. Our meditation on the fundamentals of the Christian faith, our deepest convictions about the nature of God and humanity, our serious loyalty to what the formula calls "the Word of God" contained in the scriptures, made us deeply unhappy with the decision.

Because we were unhappy with Assembly, and because the Assembly's moderator had already been invited to preside at the opening of our new church

building, we decided we needed to invite him to hear our unhappiness - before confirming or withdrawing our invitation. A brave Andrew Norton agreed to meet with us. We explained our conviction, enshrined in our mission statement, that we aspire to treat all people equally. We explained that providing civil unions, and more recently same-sex weddings, were some of the ways we actioned equal treatment. We explained how the Assembly decision had thrown our commitments into tension. Further, we noted that the prohibition's margin of victory was slim, following the departure of a large group who objected to the motion being put. Acknowledging the technical authority of the decision, we stated our belief that the decision had no **moral authority**. We all live under authority. We all are bound by it. But as soon as the conscience kicks in, shades of authority emerge. We begin to expect authority to have texture and depth, character and soul. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

That last question "by what authority", "who gave it to you", is exactly the question that the chief priests put to Jesus. Grammatically it is a question, but it's really rhetorical. They're really saying to him "you don't have authority here. In this religious domain, **we're** the ones in charge."

Jesus responds to their question, with a question of his own - also about authority. He asks them where they think John the Baptist's authority came from - offering them the options of "from heaven" or "from human origin". Jesus forces them to think about authority in stratified ways - and about the high authority they've already seen, already responded to, already attempted to squash, authority in the meeting of which they've become seriously compromised. And because they're already conscience-compromised, and because they're already more concerned about public judgment than they are about obedience to truth, they have no way of answering the question.

Having been reminded about conscience, and its capacity to wreck smaller authority, they're subjected to a parable of Jesus - about a father exercising authority over his sons. One son says "no" with his words, but "yes" with his actions. The other says "yes" with his words, and "no" with his actions. Which son did the will of his father? Which son responded properly to the authority of the father?

It's a parable in honour of the son who actually gets on with the work in the vineyard. When the good work is done, proper authority has been effective.

There's a sense in which Jesus is saying that authority lies in the quality of what it achieves. Not in empty words. Not in technical victories. Not in immediate commandment and submission. But in whether it gets work done in the vineyard. As Jesus heals and forgives, and builds community, as he gives dignity to the poor and healing to the sick, he's "walking the talk", and the authority speaks for itself. Even though his critics, out of fear, refuse to answer his soul-exposing questions about their claim to authority, **his** authority is speaking for itself. It's something akin to integrity. It's something close to truth. It's something abiding in the presence of the God who liberates and redeems. Real authority speaks for itself through the good it achieves - through the good it achieves.

I suppose you could say that Kim Jong Un has authority in North Korea. It is suspected that millions of North Koreans are hungry. Large numbers of defectors speak of the North's vast harvest of fear. Real authority speaks for itself through the good it achieves.

I suppose you could say that in America, the president has authority. Isn't it interesting that large numbers of sports people are now kneeling during the National Anthem as a questioning of the track-record of racial equality in that country - the moral authority of the administration. Real authority speaks for itself through the good it achieves.

I suppose you could say that Kiwi political authority is a bit uncertain just now - whether it lies red or blue. It is acknowledged that coalition discussions are being held, and that compromises are being made. That Winston Peters told an Australian reporter that the cancellation of the Maori seats is no longer a bottom line for him, suggests to me that one party leader has found something she is not willing to sacrifice in the pursuit of coalition. Could it be that there, behind the closed doors, higher authorities have been calling? We may never know, but real authority speaks for itself through the good it achieves.

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At sermon's end, the formula is read. The people laugh. Everyone's under authority. It gets complicated when conscience is pricked. The cost of being true can be huge. But real authority speaks for itself, through the good it achieves. May God give us open ears, discerning minds, courageous hearts, and good to achieve. Amen.

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