

Sermon Archive 243

Sunday 28 April, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 5: 27-32

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KldXtCwKTIQ>

That video clip came from the year 2007, at the launch of an organisation called “The Elders”. As former United States President Jimmy Carter gave some expression to, one of the reasons the elders were formed was that none of these highly experienced global states people cared anymore about re-election. Quite happy to act in ways that might be electorally unpopular but developmentally helpful, the elders could come up with solutions for world problems that politicians never could. Unfettered, free, non-partisan – they were.

Those of a fundamentalist approach to democracy, however, might also describe them as “unanswerable, un-mandated, non-representative”. It would be noted that “election by the people of the current day” is vastly important - it is that which gives political leaders their **authority** to act, to lead, to direct the course of the world. And indeed, Jimmy Carter, in his speech, does seem to be aware of that. He admits that none of the elders holds current office; none has an existing formal political mandate to lead. To that extent, they have no authority. Speaking of authority, he says:

The elders neither want, nor will we ever have, any kind of authority - except that which comes from common moral values. Our other strength, and source of our influence, will come from freedom to act as we decide is necessary or desirable with no adverse political consequences in prospect of criticism from constituency or seeking public office. We will be able to risk failure in worthy causes, and we will not need to claim credit for any successes that might be achieved.

He then talks about the value of sound judgment, dedication and courage.

It's a nice vision, isn't it? From amid the tangle of technically authorised political self-serving and ineffectiveness through corruption and fear, emerges a free, "we're not frightened", seekers of good for the common good. They are going to speak. And, completely without any formal authority, other than their own dignity, character and experience, they are going to help. And when you put them, and their works since 2007 next to some of the world's other authorised leaders, it does make you think, doesn't it, about the nature of authority.

It was clear to uninformed eyes in the days of the apostles who had authority. Authority was held by the Sanhedrin - the religious body chaired by the High Priest. This was the body accepted by most as having the right to regulate the life of the people of Israel. There were powers they didn't have, granted - like the power to execute their citizens. But through connections with Roman functionaries who **did** hold that power, they had a demonstrated success rate at getting people killed - recall the case of some prophet from Nazareth. No, the Sanhedrin had remarkable power, presented as a God-anointed power, to regulate the life of the Jewish world. You can hear it in the High Priest's voice, when scolding the apostles: "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching". Interestingly, he also says "and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us".

The truth is that that man's blood **was** on their hands. They had called for it. They had organised for it to be shed. But now they're insisting on some strange counterfactual account to be told. This Christian-circulated story about responsibility, and where it lies, seems to be troubling the formal authority of the day. And so, "we gave you strict orders not to teach this". We'll be in charge of this narrative, thank you.

Peter and the apostles simply note at this stage that they're more interested in God than they are in "human authority". And for that kind of statement to be made to people who claim their authority through their fidelity to God, it's a pretty obvious assault on their authority - your authority is empty - you killed him - that's the truth.

To a technically authorised self-serving, corrupt and fearful council, come

free, “we’re not frightened”, seekers of truth and good. Who’s looking on top of things? Makes you think about authority, doesn’t it!

Somewhat ironically, and sadly, the small, fearless community that found its authority in God would, within a few hundred years find itself wielding political authority - and doing almost equally as badly as the Sanhedrin had done. Clashed close to the bosom of the Empire, making it to be called not just “Roman”, but “Holy Roman”, the church became embroiled in all manner of self-service, corruption and distortion of the truth. Is there something about how certain kinds of power corrupt? We burned people at the stake. We insisted that Galileo shut up. We let the priests abuse the children, and used our power to create a silence around it. And our very own denomination, in recent time, locked out the rainbow community. The vote was close, I suppose, but the largest power block won. That decision has technical authority. Again, though, I think the gut reactions that we, and the people around us, have to these sorts of uses of authority, show that authority is more than simple power. “We must”, the apostles say, “obey God . . .”

I have little counsel to give today on how we might obey God. I’m not particularly good at it myself. According to the “Folau obedience scale” I score a probable mere one and a half out of eight. But, if I were to draw on any riches from beyond myself, I have an inkling that obedience has something to do with being alive to the prophetic voice heard in the scriptures - being alive to the holy call for peace and justice for all of God’s people. I have an inkling that the sharing of life, breaking bread and sharing it with others as some great sacramental sign of human unity and connectedness . . . has something to do with it. I have an inkling that carrying a cross for someone else might be critical - sharing in the suffering of others. And I have an inkling that when he told us, with the grammar of a commandment that was to be obeyed, that we must love one another - that may be the key. Authority won as we learn to love. I don’t know. What do I know? I think I know real authority when I see it.

As I think of Jesus, the One in whose name the apostles spoke and

taught, there are clusters of words forming around this authority thing. They're words like "service" and "truth". They're words like "respect" and "integrity". They're phrases like "peaceful heart", "commitment to love", "rejoicing in the truth". They're scenes, mental pictures of others within which I see resonances of Jesus living among the people - Christ-likeness finding form again in flesh and blood - you are the body of Christ. I think we know it when we see it. Pray God we also might be it.

The technical authorities came and said to them "we gave you strict instructions not to teach in this name" - but here **we** are, gathered in that same name. Could it be that we've been obeying God, rather than any human authority?

May that be so.

We keep a moment of quiet.