

27 September 2020

Exodus 17:1-7

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

“By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”

The atmosphere is highly charged. Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people have acclaimed him as the Messiah, God’s anointed one, the King. Jesus has taken charge over the Temple courts, driving out the money-changers and those who were buying and selling there. And when he returns to the Temple a second day, he faces the first of a succession of challenges by powerful leaders in Jerusalem. This first challenge comes from the chief priests and the elders. The elders and the chief priests controlled large tracts of land; they are wealthy and powerful. But their position is far from secure: these people hold their power at Rome’s pleasure, for the sake of expediency; and these people are vulnerable to the will of the people.

So they demand to know by what sort of authority has Jesus the right to take over the temple courts, and who has given him this authority?

But Jesus has a question of his own: “John’s baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

The question puts them in a bind, as the text explains, and so they answer, defeated, “We do not know”. And Jesus says to them, “Well, then, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

We can tend to think that this is just Jesus being clever, merely deflecting their question, putting them in an awkward situation by asking them a question they’d rather not answer.

But actually, Jesus’ question to the priests and elders is much more profound than that, and strikes at the heart of the issue. Think about the baptism that John offered at the Jordan. Matthew records that

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'" ...

People went out to John from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ...

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

[Matthew 3:1-3, 5-6, 13-17]

At this baptism Jesus was anointed (in Hebrew we would say he was 'messiahed') by God. This is where he was first declared to be God's beloved son, in other words, the Messiah.

If the elders and chief priests truly understood what John had been doing then, they would know where Jesus got the authority to act as he did in the Temple courts.

I want to talk about Covenant and Kingdom.

Covenant is the way in which the Bible describes and defines relationship: first our relationship with God, and then our relationship with everyone else. But the model for covenant relationship is found in Jesus. When Jesus is baptised by John, the voice from heaven declares "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased."

The first essential element of Covenant is the *fatherhood* of God, the one to whom Jesus could be son.

The second essential element of Covenant is *identity*. God identifies Jesus as his beloved son. Jesus' identity flowed from his relationship with God the Father; and out of this came his security and confidence. It is interesting that this was tested by Satan in the wilderness immediately after Jesus' baptism and affirmation of his identity.

The third element of Covenant is *obedience*. Obedience is simply to act in a way that is consistent with one's identity. Because of the oneness Jesus had with God the Father, he was perfectly obedient – as Jesus said in John 5: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. [John 5:19-20a] “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” [John 5:30]

Covenant relationships start with Fatherhood, leading to Identity, and thence to Obedience.

Today I'm also going to talk about Kingdom. Kingdom is the way in which the Bible describes and defines responsibility: our responsibility is to represent God to the rest of creation.

Again the model for Kingdom is found in Jesus.

The first essential element of Kingdom is the *King* himself. God is the majestic ruler of heaven and earth, and he seeks to extend his loving rule through the lives of all people. In Jesus, we have God the King, present among his people. In Jerusalem, the city of the king, he has taken authority over the temple, an act symbolising the kind of right only held by the king.

So the second element of Kingdom is *Authority*. As King, God clearly has authority to act, but remarkably expresses his authority through people who choose to accept the call to represent him. This is, of course, the authority that Jesus supremely holds, as God's true and utterly faithful representative.

The third element of Kingdom is *Power*. As the Creator and sustainer of the universe, God holds incredible power. He chooses to use this to express his love to people, and, surprisingly, gives this power to those he has authorised to represent him. In Jesus, we see over and over again evidence of this power – power to teach and to correct; power to heal, to forgive, to release from bondage; power to save.

Kingdom responsibility starts with the *King*, who gives *Authority* to his representatives, and equips them with *Power*.

“By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”

The elders and chief priests challenge Jesus.

But Jesus is secure in both Covenant and Kingdom respects: he is secure in his identity given by God the Father, and his obedience is absolute; his authority comes from God the King, and he is clothed with commensurate power.

The elders and chief priests challenge Jesus.

But if the elders and chief priests had understood what John’s baptism was all about – and had understood all that Jesus taught and did, and how that revealed and fulfilled God’s covenant and kingdom purposes for humankind – then they would have appreciated that it was not Jesus who was under examination. By making the response he does, and in the parable he tells, Jesus brings the chief priests and elders under scrutiny; they are in fact the ones really being challenged.

They are not obedient to the calling that goes with their identity. They are like the son in the parable who tells his vineyard-owning father, “Yes, I will do as you ask”, and then fail to show up. *The covenant calling is for the sake of enabling others to enter into the relationship of being beloved children of Father God*; but the elders and chief priests have tried to co-opt this holy covenant calling for their exclusive advantage. They claim an exclusiveness of identity, rather than recognising that their identity as beloved children of God comes as a result of God the Father’s love which is an *inclusive*, not *exclusive*, love. They would claim obedience to the covenant, but their kind of obedience fails to properly recognise that the covenant

embraces those who, like the other son in the parable, like the prostitutes and tax collectors, might initially say “No, I will not,” but then enter into the covenant relationship in humility and gratitude.

The elders and chief priests don't understand Kingdom ways of authority and power. The world uses power – violence, alienation, captivity, manipulation, oppression, control of resources – as the means of obtaining and holding authority. Jesus however had a kind of kingly authority that did not need to be displayed in worldly ways of power. He came into Jerusalem in peace, riding on a donkey. He had such humility that he went on to die on a cross, a form of death designed to completely degrade and humiliate the victim.

It turns out that the authority and power held by the chief priests and elders is actually very precarious. It takes its source from the Roman oppressors, and is to some degree limited by the power of the people – and the elders and chief priests are afraid of the power of the people. Rome won't prop up their position if it becomes too hard to keep the people subdued.

“By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” The question of the source and nature of Jesus' authority is not just an historical issue.

We each need to decide for ourselves what Jesus means to us.

And I believe that a good way of thinking about our answer lies in the principles of Covenant and Kingdom.

Through his work on the cross Jesus has enabled each of us to become people of covenant and kingdom. We are both, on the one hand, beloved children of God, tasked with obediently representing his loving call to all people; and, on the other hand, given authority to humbly exercise his power for the good of all creation, challenging the rival powers of this world with the good news that Jesus is the world's rightful king.

The world today is filled with people who abuse power; filled with people using the multifarious instruments of power to try to assert authority for their own ends rather than for the good of those they rule.

The world today is filled with people feeling deep and toxic shame because they feel they are not good enough; and others who assert they can do whatever they like.

We look at the world around us, and we may wonder “what can we do?”

Individually and collectively we are called to live and model a different way, a way of humbly holding authority, a way of obedience that flows out of gratitude and love.

Individually and collectively we are called to pray through God’s beloved Son, confident in the power of the one to whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

Individually and collectively we are called to be voices that challenge narratives of abusive power and toxic shame and laissez faire morality.

Individually and collectively we are called to be people of Covenant and Kingdom, for the sake of the world God loves.

Sources

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