

Holy Monday

Matthew 21:23-27

When he entered the temple,
the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Jesus as he was teaching, and said,
“By whose authority are you doing these things,
and who gave you this authority?”
Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question;
if you will tell me the answer,
then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.
Did the baptism of John come from heaven
or was it of human origin?”
And they argued with one another,
“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us,
‘Why did you not believe him?’
But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’
we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”
So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”
And he said to them,
“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Let us pray: Lord, there is so much information coming at us. So many who claim to speak with authority. How do we know who to listen to? By whose authority do they speak?

Help us listen for yours. Keep us attuned to your voice. Amen.

“Whose Authority?”

Jesus looks like he evades the question posed to him by the chief priests and elders of the people. Actually Jesus answers them, in the form of a question. If they could answer Jesus’ question then they would have had their answer, because the answer was the same. John the Baptist’s authority came from God and not from people, so guess what? Jesus received his authority from the same source.

“By what authority?” is a good question to ask when evaluating what people are saying and what they are doing. During this pandemic, there is all kinds of false medical advice being given, it is important to know the source is a doctor that you trust, not some lay person with little or no training or understanding of what is going on with your body and your health.

There are people in authority that we hope we can trust, like governmental authorities who ask us to shelter in place, to stay home and off the roads. We listen because they say that the well being of our community depends upon it. We may be responsible for ourselves, but they have accepted responsibility for a whole state, whole nation, or even the whole world.

The day before, Jesus had gone into the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, and took a cord and like a shepherd drove animals out of their stalls that were waiting to be sold for sacrifice. By whose authority did he do such a disruptive act? Who authorized his protest?

Indigenous peoples are protesting pipelines that are being directed across their lands. They did so at Standing Rock and they are doing it also in Canada. Their disruptive acts of protest have caused a stir and has raised a question as to who has the authority to allow oil companies to trespass on their land and threaten the integrity of their water supply? In the United States it is still being fought out in the courts, and also in Canada. Native peoples say they have authority over what happens on their land, national and state governments send in their troops and say that they have the authority to do as they please. Who gives you authority to do what you do? Who says you have the obligation to protest?

I have been out twice to join the on going protest outside the detention center in Berks County. Refugee women and children are being held there in detention. By whose authority do we protest? We say the Bible mandates it, as we seek to provide care for the stranger in our land.

There are churches in the conference who have provided their church buildings as sanctuaries for those fleeing ICE. They do it as an act of Christian compassion, but by whose authority do they do these things?

John went to the river to baptize because God wanted him to call people to repentance. He felt it in his bones. It sang forth from his very soul. He had to obey the God who spoke to his heart, even if other authorities did not like it. You know what happened, the civil authority placed him in prison and took off his head.

John knew his authority. Those who agreed with him knew his authority. But his authority to speak was not universally acknowledged.

Jesus tells us that he only did what he saw his father already doing: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, even raising the dead. He claimed to do nothing on his own. Jesus also make it clear that what he taught was not his words, but the words of the Father. Jesus knew his authority. Those who agreed with him knew his authority. But the Chief Priests, and the elders of the people, Pontius Pilate, and Herod did not recognize his authority at all. By whose authority do you do these things?

How about you, where do you find your authority for what you say and do in the name of Jesus Christ? Some will say that they get it from the Bible, yes but even the Devil says that. Some will say that they get it from the church, like pastors who have been ordained, or bishops who have been consecrated for the task, yes but some pastors have done great evil, and not all bishops have been seen as a blessing and some have been martyred even as they served Holy Communion like Archbishop Oscar Romero. Some will rely upon the authority of the degrees bestowed upon them by institutions of higher learning, universities and seminaries, but still there are those who question their authority. Where do you get your authority?

All of these sources of authority are important and enrich our trust in what others say and do. Ultimately God is the only true source of authority. And what has God authorized any of us to do?

I would say that we have been authorized just like Jesus and John to bear fruit. Bearing the fruit of the Spirit is always right, and whatever diminishes this fruit is to be held in question. If it is not loving, it is not from God because God is love. If our words and actions do not instill joy in the hearts of others, our authority to say and do them is questionable. If others do not receive a sense of peace about what is being said and done, they are justified to question our authority. If their questions are met with impatience from us; when they feel pushed around they should question our authority. If kindness shines through from what we are trying to express and it seems filled with generosity of spirit, then we can be trusted. If we are

faithful, being honest and truthful, we should deserve some trust. There is a gentleness to true authority, you should not feel bullied nor pushed around. Those with authority are able to practice self-control; they show authority over their own lives first.

Where does your authority come from?
Let us imitate Christ.

Let us pray: As we enter into this holy week, draw us closer to Christ. Give us a deeper trust of his authority over our lives. Keep us in your care. Amen.

The question asked on Holy Tuesday:
“What is the greatest Commandment?”