

There's been a lot of talk in recent months about the amount of power that State governments have; especially to make decisions about when we have to be in lockdown, when we come out of lockdown, what we can do in lockdown. Some people say that our premiers are giving themselves such power that they're becoming like dictators. It's all about authority isn't it? Who has the authority to do what?

In today's passage some Jewish leaders asked Jesus about his authority. Authority is basically the power someone has to make decisions or to give orders; the power or right to direct or control someone or something. We sometimes say, “he has no authority to get you to do that”. So we ask the question, “What gives you the right to do what you are doing?”

PRAY

We have now come to the last week of Jesus' life before he is going to be crucified. At the beginning of Chapter 21 Jesus enters Jerusalem. But he doesn't come in quietly. A huge crowd gathers at the gates of Jerusalem as they hear he is coming and they welcome him in with cries of “Praise to the Son of David!

‘Welcome! God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’ For three years now Jesus has been wandering the countryside, teaching people, healing people, raising people from the dead. He has shown a power that no human has – it must be a power that comes from God or comes from him BEING God.

So in these next 5 chapters there is a clash of authority. Jesus has come to the headquarters of the Jewish faith, Jerusalem. This was where the Temple was. This is the one place where the Jews offered their sacrifices to God. This was the place where all the Jews gathered a few times in the year to remember what God had done for them in the past and to worship him. Whoever was in charge of the Temple had a great deal of authority; whoever was doing things at the Temple had a lot of authority.

And this is where we start in our passage today. There is a clash of authority – the chief priests and elders and Temple vs Jesus who is going to become the new Temple. There are a whole lot of incidents in our story today, but they all hinge on who has the authority.

So let's go to v.12 – Jesus walks into the Temple. Two things stand out here which display his authority. He cleans out the Temple. Matthew tells us that he overturned the money changers tables and the tables of those who sold doves. Officially the Chief priests were the ones in charge of the Temple – they had allowed this selling to go on in the Temple. Now Jesus overthrows it all and says You have made MY house, hear that, MY house, a “den of robbers” – it should be a house of prayer, he says. Then notice something else, in v.14, the lame and the blind come to him into the Temple. They weren't allowed into the Temple. But Jesus welcomes them and then he heals them. Who has the authority?

And so in v.23, these chief priests, the ones who think that they have the authority, they come to Jesus. Listen to their question – “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” Who said you could clean out the Temple, heal the blind and lame inside the Temple area and then be teaching as if you are a rabbi.

The central question in all of this was: “Jesus are you the Messiah?” The answer was this: it was the Messiah who would have authority over the Temple. Jesus, let's face it, had walked in and had behaved as though he owned the place. Here he was, a country boy from Galilee, coming to the big smart capital city. He walked into its holiest place, which had been ruled for centuries by the chief priests. And for a moment he took it over. Who did he think he was?

The only person who might conceivably have greater authority in the Temple than the High Priest was God's anointed king, the Messiah – if, and when, he showed up. Nobody knew when that would be. Now Jesus is behaving as if he had the right to do what only the Messiah had the right to do. Who gave you right to do this?

We see people who have authority in our society – Premier, has the authority to make all kinds of decisions; Prime Minister; policeman; judge; boss at work. They have their authority because of their position. This is different. Jesus has authority because of who he is – he is the one who made this world; who keeps this world running; who has all power to heal, raise the dead etc. The thing that continues to amaze me as we read through Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus doesn’t throw his weight around. He could have. He could have been a world leader. But that’s not why he came. He came to rescue us. And the only way he could do that was by giving up his life for us. And we see in this chapter and the next few chapters, which are full of Jesus’ words to the Jewish leaders, he doesn’t give up on them. He continues to speak to them, to show them how off the mark they are with God.

Jesus should have been rightly offended. Of course he has the authority – God has given him the authority. Haven’t they seen it – he has the power to heal, to raise people from the dead. One of these people raised from the dead, Lazarus, only lived about 5kms outside of Jerusalem and they knew about him.

Jesus should have really told them off. But he graciously gives them a way out while at the same time helps them to see how wrong their thinking is. And so we have him asking about John the Baptist and then the parable about the two sons in v.28. The Father asks the first son to go and work in the vineyard. Nah, no way, Dad. But later he changes his mind and does go and work. Second son – father asks him to go and work. Sure Dad, no worries. But he never goes. So Jesus asks the question – Which son did what the Father wanted?

It’s obvious, the first son. And so Jesus makes the point in v.31. “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and prostitutes are like the first son. They have lived lives disobeying me , But now they have repented and so they are coming into the Kingdom of God, my kingdom ahead of you guys. You guys are like the second son. Yes, you do the religious things, but in your hearts you do not follow God , you do not accept me as the Messiah, you are unwilling to repent, to turn around to follow God.

In the midst of all this talk about authority we have this curious incident of the fig tree. The fig tree is like a parable to explain what is happening in the Temple. The fig tree, like the vine, is one of the classic symbols of Israel in the Old Testament. If you wanted to be a characteristic Israelite, you sat under a fig tree. It's a bit like a classic Aussie is the bronzed surfer wearing an Akubra hat – kind of. But it's still a strange event isn't it? Why does Jesus destroy the fig tree? Is he just having a bad day, lost his temper? At first glance it seems like that. But if we look at it in its context, with the other events around it we can see what Jesus is doing. The fig tree, the symbol of someone sitting under it, is a person who loves God and follows God. This is an acted parable – Jesus is giving a message through his actions with the fig tree. He's come into Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish faith; to the Temple, the central place where the Jews worshipped God. He's gone to the Temple and cleaned it out. Jesus longs to find some fruit among God's people, Israel. Unfortunately, all he finds is leaves! What good is that to him? The meaning is plain. Instead of the fruit of righteousness, of response to the Messiah, of entry into the Kingdom, Jesus had been met by narrow and legalistic religion that refused to listen to his message and his claims. His action when he said to the fig tree, "May you never bear fruit again!" was the action of God's frustrated hunger for true religion. The days were coming very soon when the leaves would be stripped from the fig tree of Israel. There was a Jewish uprising 30 years later and the Jews were crushed by Rome. The Temple was destroyed, never to be built again – only one wall remains today. Judgement is coming to the Temple. As he destroys the fig tree Jesus is giving the disciples an acted out parable of what is going to happen to people who reject God. who reject Jesus.

Let us welcome in Jesus to change us, renew us – let us not be like the chief priests and religious leaders, hoping that our good works will get us through. It's relationship that God wants. People who depend on him. People who trust him, who look to him for every need. As we allow God into every part of our lives so he changes us, moulds us. I still think that there are people sitting here this morning or on Zoom who feel that they must somehow measure up to God's standards then God will listen to them or accept them. This is not how he works. He says Come to me AS YOU ARE, AS YOU ARE. Let me change you; let me give you a love for your neighbour; or that person who you don't talk to anymore; or that situation at work.

I want to make an observation here about how Jesus responds. Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple; Jesus destroying the fig tree. I've given an answer about why he responds this way. But I wanted to make another observation. We could easily say, "Oh, these Jewish leaders, they were so unbelieving, they made Jesus angry, their actions caused Jesus to be angry. It wasn't his fault." We easily say the same, don't we? Oh, so and so did this to me and made me angry or made me upset. This happened to me on Thursday. I try to have Thursday as a Sabbath day and Georgina made a comment to me reminding me of this. Now I had a choice to make. I could thank her sincerely for reminding me or I could try and defend myself and make some snide comment. Well, I chose the second option and made an unkind response to her. Now George wasn't making me upset or making me say unkind words. I was choosing to do this. No one can force us to act in sinful ways. We choose this. I chose this. And I needed to ask George's forgiveness. Jesus gives us the strength to make right choices of how to respond. Now matter how tired we feel, how irritating the kids are, or the parents are, we are still responsible for the choices we make. And God is in the business of changing the way that we respond to others; the choices we make as to how to respond. We can ask for his help every minute of every day. God is in the business of changing how we relate to him and how we relate to each other. He's not worried about how successful you are as a student, or worker, whether you have a big house etc. But he is wanting us to grow to love him and each other. He wants to see the fruit of his life in us – so that we are patient, kind, loving, gentle, compassionate, joyful, faithful, and self-controlled. Trusting in Jesus.

The tenants parable – pretty straightforward. But you've got to put yourself into the Jewish mind here. You were raised on the prophets. You read the teaching of the prophets through the year and then when you came to the great festivals you heard it some more. Here Jesus gives reference directly quoting or indirectly to at least 4 passages from the Old Testament that were well known.

The parable tells about a landowner who prepares a really nice farm; then he rents it out. When harvest time comes he sends his servants to collect the rent. The servants get treated

badly and some are killed. Finally, the landowner sends his son and the son gets killed. It's a parable about how the Jewish people have treated God's messengers, the prophets, through the years. Finally, God sends his only Son, Jesus, and he gets killed. Surely the Son with all the power and authority of God will be listened to and obeyed. But No he is killed.

And then Jesus makes the point with reference to prophecies in the Old Testament, that Jesus is like the stone that was rejected and this stone becomes the most important stone holding the whole building together, the capstone or cornerstone. But he is also like the rock prophesied in Daniel that would destroy all other kingdoms. If you go against him, the Rock, you will be crushed.

And these guys, the chief priests, Pharisees etc they know Jesus is talking about them. They know that he has authority that they don't have. But what do they do. Last verse - "they look for a way to arrest him". They do exactly what Jesus said they would do in the parable. It's tragic isn't it? But you know people still today are like the chief priests and Pharisees.

Application:

You have to make a response to Jesus. You could be sitting in your seat and say well this is all interesting Dave but where's the relevance for me. Well, here it is. God has made this world. He has made us to live in relationship with him. You have to answer the question – Does Jesus have authority to rule my life? Is Jesus the kind of leader I would want to be guiding my life?

What will be the way that you respond?

PRAYER: