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Sermon

By what Authority?

Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

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The young carpenter stood at the entrance to the temple gazing around. Had you looked closely you would have seen in His eyes a mixture of sadness and fury. How is it possible for a place of worship to be used to cheat people? They had to change their hard-earned cash for the temple coins. These and these only were the ones able to be used for the purchase of the sacrificial animals. How is it possible that the place where the God of Peace is worshipped to become the center of revolution; where the need for Israel to fulfill her destiny by driving out the despised Romans and once again become an independent Nation overrules the responsibility to worship God. Injustice from without and oppression from within ruled. The young carpenter seemed so insignificant in the face of so much political power and powerful ideologies.

To the surprise of friend and foe alike He began to make a whip and drove out the money changers. He turned over the tables they were using, scattering their coins and in His anger cried out from one of the Psalms, "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers."

Temple worship is temporarily stopped until order is returned.

Only the day before He had entered Jerusalem seated on a donkey. Israel's King, humbled and lowly. Now look at Him! The warrior King doing battle so that His Father's house will be what it was supposed to be, a place of peace for all people, a place where God is worshipped. The humble carpenter has taken center stage. Both acts were provocative. Both raise the same questions. Who are you? By what authority do you do these things? Those asking the question are the Temple authorities. By what right does Jesus bypass them and begin to act as if he had a right to do so. Only someone with greater authority than they could do such things.

That is the point. Jesus' actions have always been completely in tune with His teaching. All through the Gospels Matthew Mark Luke and John have shown how Jesus words and works provoked the same question. "Who is this Man?"

Each of the Gospels in its own way has a point at which the tension that these questions raise reaches a breaking point. Matthew has arrived at that point now. From here on until the end of Chapter 23 Jesus is in debate or dispute with the Jewish leaders. All around is the question stated or implied, "Who are you? By what authority do you do these things?" Word and deed combine to lead to the inevitable conclusion that this man is the Messiah. That is His authority.

Neither friend nor foe has yet seen what kind of Messiah. Neither friend nor foe has seen that the Messiah must die to fulfill his mission. Neither friend nor foe has the slightest inkling that Jesus will be raised from the dead. But for now, one point and one point only is being stressed; *only the Messiah could do these things.*

This carpenter from the provinces with no official standing; this insignificant man who yet does highly significant things; this traveling preacher with the unimportant and unlearned as His followers; THIS Man is the Messiah. That was hard enough to grasp, but harder still was what kind of Messiah. No one yet knew that His humble self-giving would go to the extent of submitting to death, even that most cruel of deaths; crucifixion.

In these two scenes, the Triumphal Entry, and the Cleansing of the Temple, we see Jesus in His power and in His humility. Each attribute inseparable from the other. *We* know that this is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the One by whom worlds were made. We also know that He is a *humble* powerful Man.

What they did not know then, but will perceive later, is that He represents Humanity as we were meant to be. But our second lesson shows that clearly.

If great power is to be given to the sons and daughters of God, it can only be given with safety to those who will exercise it in humility. Power is only safe in the hands of those who act as servants. Listen to St Paul,

“And being in the form of God
He did not count equality with God
a thing to be grasped, But emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant.....”

Did you notice the repeat of the word “form”? It is the same word in the Greek as it is in English. When God revealed His nature and character, it was in the form of a *servant* because that is how the Trinity relate. Each member is subject to the others. Each member is always seeking the honour and glory of the others. Each is doing the will of the others. THAT is why Paul is saying to the Philippians that they should treat each other as BETTER than themselves.

Now, I don't know you feel about that, but I can tell you for me it is one of the toughest things I have ever had to attempt. Which should not surprise me because what Paul is asking the Philippians and through them asking ME is ***behave as God does!!!!*** If you want to know what it means to “Love your neighbor”, it doesn't get any clearer or simpler than this.

This is what the Holy Spirit is busy transforming us into. This is what is meant by “take up your cross daily and follow me.” This is what is meant by “love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you.” Learning to co-operate with this project of transformation by the Holy Spirit will be the central part of your life's journey.

Power is safe in the hands of people like this. It is NOT safe with anyone else. Take a look around you and you will see that portrayed throughout the world. Everywhere we see power being abused. Great despots oppress whole nations, men oppress women and women oppress men. Sex trafficking is the largest form of modern-day slavery earning organized criminal networks billions of dollars annually. More than 2 million children are exploited in this way. The world's most vulnerable, poor women and children suffer the worst. Why? Simply because they can be.

And what of the Church building in London where a friend of mine was Vicar. The church had two entrances, one for the aristocracy and another for their servants.

There is no need to say more. The list of injustice cruelty and inequality is almost endless.

What can we do in the face of all this?

Listen to the Carpenter from Nazareth! Watch Him. Copy Him. Become like Him. Every little light in the world pushes back against the darkness around us.

Be prepared to speak up against oppression and exploitation wherever it is found. But do so with compassion for both the exploiter and those exploited.

Listen to the Carpenter so that if He wants you to do more, He has an open heart to speak to.

Remember too that every LITTLE helps. You may not be able to do much, but you can do something. You may not be able to do great things, but the small things matter.

BUT as you do, remember, the exploiter is loved by God too. Their crimes are heinous, but they can and will be forgiven if they repent. Remember the story of Jonah.

For this is the hardest lesson to learn! Yet it is absolutely central to the teaching of our two readings. I have often said to you that it is when we are RIGHT that we are in great danger. It is so easy to look down our noses at those we think are wrong. It is only a short step from there to disliking them and an even shorter step to thinking they are less than you. We are all only a heartbeat away from praying or at least thinking that most terrible of prayers, "Thank you God that I am not like....." You fill in the blank.

Here is how one man describes our world:

"The culture we live in has accepted two huge lies.

The first is that if you disagree with someone's lifestyle you must hate them.

The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe say or do.

Both are nonsense - You don't have to compromise your convictions to be compassionate." (Dave Chappelle)

Both Paul and Our Lord are saying the same thing. Only with a heart attitude of genuine respect for the other person can we begin to say, "You are wrong." Anything less will lead us to repeat the injustices we see in the world around us.

Our Lord's teaching, life and death all gave the same message. His actions wrote large the truths He was proclaiming. He longs to share with us the power that he has so that we may see more of the same miracles that He saw. Many times, the power will be released despite us out of God's compassion for those in need. The challenge to us today is to begin by treating all people as equal and with compassion especially those with whom we disagree or whose lifestyle does not fit in with the Gospel. Each and every step in this direction lines us up with the will and purpose of the God we serve and adore. Every step in this direction leads us to become a church our Lord can trust with His power.