

Matthew 21:23-32

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?' 24 Jesus replied, 'I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 25 John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?' They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will ask, "Then why didn't you believe him?" 26 But if we say, "Of human origin" – we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.' 27 So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.' Then he said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28 'What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." 29 "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go. 31 'Which of the two did what his father wanted?' 'The first,' they answered. Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Questions of authority

Matthew 21:23-32

I called this Questions of authority, although the heading for this in the NIV version is **The authority of Jesus questioned**. At the moment authority is a big issue for everyone because we're all generally concerned to keep the law, but at the same time we're subject to a lot of very intrusive new laws due to the virus, which are causing everyone stress, whether or not we agree with them. And let's face it we all break the law from time to time, even if it's only the speed limit, or the rule of 6. So where do we look for authority? Boris, Sir Keir, Donald? The thing in the exchange with the high priests was that the *unspoken* question was the one about whether or not Jesus was The Messiah. The Real one. And if he was, this was a threat to the establishment because he really wasn't behaving as they thought a Proper Messiah should behave. He broke all their laws. But *at the same time* it had to be admitted that he taught with authority. It was very confusing. *He* was very confusing, there seemed to be more questions than answers. And this is the interesting thing about Jesus's response here because he doesn't answer their question. Thus escaping their trap. *'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?' Jesus replied, 'I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

He answers their question with a question.

In fact he asks three questions just in the passage we heard. I'm reliably informed, although I haven't checked this out, that He only answers 3 questions directly in all of the gospel accounts. And if you look, a lot of his teaching takes this approach, of making his opponents, and his disciples, ask themselves what they believe and why. You and I need to do this too. Where do we see authority residing, who are we putting their faith in and why. He didn't answer them here, and he didn't often come out and blatantly declare who He was.

Too often we think faith is about finding answers to all our questions but that would be a very shallow faith. I've seen it happen with people who think they have their beliefs about God all wrapped up and watertight. And they feel secure the more certain they are about everything. But then one brick is pulled out of the wall so to speak, maybe something bad happens, and the whole lot comes down, and they lose their faith.

Voltaire said: *Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.* The question is, do we put our faith in what we're told is true, or what we think we understand about God, or maybe in the church? Or a preacher? Or tradition? These are all shaky foundations.

Your place of safety is God himself. Nothing and no one else. And so the one thing we CAN be certain about is that God loves us and is to be trusted.

Faith is yes, about belief in all the things Jesus taught and the bible teaches, but it's also about doubts and questions. Jesus actually taught **by** asking questions, especially when he was confronted by the High priests and teachers of the law. We have to be clear that each one of us has a unique and developing relationship with God, and this is where faith lies, in growing that relationship, constantly getting to know God better.

Anyway, back to the plot.

Jesus' question here requires the chief priests, rather than simply carrying out their usual roles, to ask themselves questions about their own issues. If John the Baptist was from God, why weren't *they*, as supposedly holy men, going and getting baptised?

And following Jesus, because John was pointing them to him. On the other hand if they said John was under human authority then Jesus would ask well who would that be then? The *crowds* were convinced John was a great prophet, and so they'd be very unpopular if they gave that answer. So what do they say? "We don't know". **"We don't know"**!! And so the chief priests, are revealed as having no authority at all, despite their apparent importance! But Jesus gives them no comfort, and no answer. It's not entirely clear from the next verse (28) who Jesus is telling the following parable to, probably a crowd, but at the end of the section (45) it's clear that the chief priests heard it anyway. The message is certainly clear that the High priests need to repent and rethink their whole act. But Jesus knows it's too late.

They've already made up their minds to get rid of him.
So verse 28, the words "*what do you think?*" I think are addressed to us, to anyone who reads them.
If we've fallen for the modern conviction that science will explain everything and that the spiritual realities Jesus speaks about don't exist, we will probably have already made up our minds. Yes he was a great moral teacher, but is there no more to Him than that, because we've decided that there is no God?
The great thing about this parable is that speaks hope to every single person, even atheists. To quote Voltaire again *certainty is absurd*. Whatever you believe, are you really so certain?
The parable of the two sons is fascinating because it's obviously aimed at the Chief Priests and their hypocrisy, but it also challenges each one of us as to where our true commitment lies.
The first son is clearly going to be difficult, and when asked for help he refuses point blank. The second son by contrast sounds so keen: "I will sir!" And yet they both do the exact opposite.
So this is a direct challenge both to those of us who would say that we definitely believe and would act on it. *And* to those who reject the idea of faith completely.
To a believer the message is that we must put our money where our mouth is and act on our commitment. How much of a sacrifice are we *really* prepared to make, or like the second son, will our faith melt away when the going gets tough?

To an unbeliever it's the reassurance that whatever they might have done, whatever they might have thought, however bad they've been, like the thief on the cross, it's never too late to turn to Christ and fall on our knees before Him.
Repent and Believe. John's message. And the Kingdom of God will be opened to you.
To anyone who thinks: 'this doesn't apply to me' here's the news: it does. Part of repentance is recognition of who has the authority over your life.
The Question still is: Who has the authority over my life?
Colossians 1: Jesus is the image of the invisible God,..... all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church.... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
Matthew 28:18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
That is an answer.
Everything, *everything* comes second to Him. *Anything* we think is more important is challenged by his very presence. He is the true Messiah. Whether we believe in Him or not doesn't change who He is.
Amen.