

SERMON 1 OCTOBER 2017

Do you sometimes wonder what it must have been like for those men and women who had given up their normal lives, the trade and livelihood that they had probably prepared for from childhood, as fishermen, tax-collectors even, homemakers; what it must have been like for them to then find themselves sharing their lives with Jesus? How extraordinary it was for them to have been found, called out by this man who possessed such charisma and whose faith and conviction was so irresistible! Did they lie awake at night thinking about all the mind-blowing things they had seen and heard: Jesus touching lepers, healing people with all kinds of illnesses, stilling the raging wind and waves, even walking to them across the water? What was it like to have lived so closely, sharing all the commonplace things of everyday living, while seeing how Jesus took himself off in the still-dark early morning to pray. Then, how did it feel to see how the chief priests and elders, people they had always respected, who seemed so imposing and learned, came along, clearly with simmering anger and wanting to challenge Jesus?

Perhaps we forget that these were very much flesh and blood men and women, not just characters in a story we know quite well. The stories can lose their impact from frequent telling. The Scriptures are so clearly stories of ordinary people and extraordinary people struggling to make sense of life and faith and often unable to do so. Through all these stories is woven the relationship with God. We read how that evolved as their stories were told and retold, recounting how they had found God to be with them, as well as those times when God seemed to have abandoned them. We have thought about the Exodus story, that long, long, difficult journey, laced through with grumbling, with fear and with genuine physical, mental and emotional hardship. "Is the Lord among us or not?" cried the Hebrew people. Sometimes they knew God's presence, sometimes they experienced absence. This was a foundational journey of faith which echoes down the years.

The disciples knew from all that they had seen that they were experiencing God at work in Jesus. How else could there have been such wisdom, such authority! But accepting that clearly also meant realising that their world was being turned upside down. They must have known, increasingly, that their commitment to following

Jesus meant moving away from the structures of their religion. How were they to understand this in the light of all the stories that had become part of their identity as Jewish people who for centuries had looked to the coming of the Messiah? Could it really be happening right in front of them? “You are the Christ”, Peter has said, voicing what they could see and knew in their hearts was so extraordinarily real for them. Here was their Messiah and they were his disciples!

But they were up against it. The crowds may have flocked around them all, crowds of people hungry not just for food but for healing, for wisdom, for words that brought them together and warmed their hearts and souls, words that gave life meaning, words that connected them to God, but there were plenty more who they knew were set against Jesus. These were the powerful men; the chief priests and elders. These were the people with most to lose – their very authority. So, when the crowds cheered Jesus on into Jerusalem, as they had done just before the passage we heard from Matthew, the religious leaders feared that things were getting out of hand. And that is perfectly understandable.

We don't like it when things appear to challenge the good order of society, of our families, of our church, of our community. We strongly defend the things that we think are essential for stability and security. But, more even than that, none of us likes it when things challenge our own sense of self, our identity, our egos, which are often connected with the roles we play. This is as true in church circles as anywhere else.

All these things were going on for the chief priests and elders who came to Jesus, trying to put him on the spot about where he got his authority from.

“Where does your authority come from?” We know how Jesus dealt with this – by putting them into an impossible situation where they couldn't concede that God had any part of this authority, either for John the Baptist or for Jesus. They were unable to answer.

Where does your authority come from? It is an important question. Jesus never claimed this authority for himself. He knew, and stated, that it came from God. So

everything he did was in service of God, his father. His humility in this is something we do well to hold before us. This was no ego power-trip for Jesus. If anything it was the opposite as he gave of himself and dealt with people's misunderstandings. Paul, in the words we heard from his letter to the church at Philippi, wrote eloquently of this: "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death upon a cross!"

The one who was given the authority was the most humble! What a lesson for us all to learn to take to heart! Wouldn't the world be a different place if our leaders could grasp this! Paul knew that it was this very lack of humility that was endangering the harmony of the young community at Philippi. Nothing much changes down the centuries!

Jesus also knew that much of people's attitudes was affected by how they felt themselves perceived in society. This was a culture deeply rooted in shame and honour. He knew how hard it was for the religious authorities to change their minds. He tells the parable of the father asking his two sons to help. One says yes, which was the honourable thing to do, but doesn't go; the other refuses, which was unheard of and shameful, but then changes his mind and does go. So this was not such an easy decision to make about who did the right thing. Where does the shame or honour lie? Clearly Jesus is implying that the elders and chief priests are more likely to act in the way that appears honourable and say the right thing, but don't actually do it. To say that they are then worse than tax collectors and prostitutes who do not initially do the right thing but then have a change of heart was deeply insulting. This was indeed a voice of a higher authority speaking out to those who thought that their authority was beyond challenge. Jesus will tell another parable in a similar vein and then the chief priests and Pharisees will go away looking for a way to arrest him.

Jesus was not displaying authority to boost himself or his power. He could only act like this because he knew how much this was not about himself but about God's

purpose of life, love, healing and justice. He could only act like this because he was humble at his core. Being humble did not mean letting wrong go unchallenged. Jesus acted like this because he believed in what he was doing and had complete faith in God. This did not mean that it was easy. It was anything but. The fact that he, in great humility, had to go through such misunderstanding, opposition, unjust suffering and pain is what brings hope to all those who struggle against oppressive power and authority. He would submit to all of this, enduring also the torment of wondering why God seemed to have forsaken him. So he carries meaning for all those who feel humiliated rather than humble, all those who, like the Hebrew people wandering in the desert, question "Is the Lord among us or not?"

All people go through such times of questioning, no matter how strong their faith is. Just one of countless examples is Mother Theresa. Some time after her death her diaries were published. What surprised many people were the revelations of her ties of struggle and darkness. Maybe you have escaped this struggle, but you are unusual if you have! This darkness is what many people know. It can creep up on us and lead us into doubt where the only thing that we hold onto seems to be our own egos. It can happen when people see, for instance, how their egos have led them to make bad choices, like the second son in the parable. But then they may change their minds and their lives, perhaps in the bleakness shame and find that the light of acceptance still shines for them as they stand, stripped of pretence. This is the birthing of hope. It arises out of the struggle between where we look to as the authority in our lives and the humility that acknowledges the need for a change of heart. It is the humility we know when we come before God in truthfulness and bow our heads before the loving, forgiving, awe-inspiring and wise authority of God. Hopefully it is with even the beginnings of such humility that we stretch out our hands to receive the bread and the wine which indicate for us that God is present to us in Christ Jesus. Hopefully it is with humility that we are remember that this is what brings us together and strengthens us in faith and in hope. Then we can be a true community of God's people. Thanks be to God!