

Authority

Epiphany 4

Dt 18: 15-20
Psalm 111
Rev 12:1-5
Mark 1:21-28

They were all amazed and they kept asking one another,
'What is this? A new teaching – with authority!'

Mark 1:27

Authority is not easily defined, although it is easy to recognize:

- If the car behind me on the motorway has a flashing blue light and the word 'stop' illuminated, then I know the driver has authority to make me pull over.
- If a policeman comes to the door of my house and has a warrant signed by a magistrate then I know he has authority to search the building
- If my doctor tells me to give up smoking or to rest my leg then I know he or she is speaking with authority.

The crowd in today's gospel recognizes that Jesus has authority – and they seem rather surprised. At the end of his gospel Matthew tells us of Jesus' final words, his claim for himself:

All authority in earth and in heaven has been given to me.

Matthew 28:18

Later Christians had time to reflect on the nature of Christ's authority. And so Paul wrote to the Ephesians that Jesus was

far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power or Domination,
or any other name that can be named,
not only in this age but also in the age to come

Ephesians 1:21

It seems to me that the greatest challenge to Christians is to discern and recognize the authority of Christ. And both of these are hard.

Discerning the authority of Christ is hard because there are so many other sources of authority, some legitimate and some illegitimate. The discernment comes in knowing which is which.

For example, there are some Christians who are very agitated about the theory of evolution. They believe that it conflicts with the teachings of Genesis and must therefore be wrong. Now it is not for me as a priest to tell you that the theory of evolution is either right or wrong. It seems to me as a layman that it is a reasonable theory. And that is the point. I am a layman in these terms. The theory of evolution is one where scientists have authority. It may be that if evolution is a fact then we have to interpret the scriptures accordingly as in practice most of the Christians church has. So most of the Christian church has recognized, quite rightly in my opinion, that in the matter of evolution authority lies with scientists and not with theologians. And in so far as scientists are using their god given intelligence and in so far as they are assessing evidence honestly, they are acting with the authority of Christ. What we receive in Genesis is not a scientific theory about what happened and when but a theological theory about its significance.

But in the 1930s the opposite happened - in that the much of the church made an incorrect discernment. The matter here was not a scientific one but a political one. It was the matter of how to deal with fascism. And here the majority of the Christian church got it wrong. The Roman Catholic church in Spain and Italy reached comfortable agreements with Franco and Mussolini. But the greatest error lay in Germany. Here both the Roman and Protestant Churches were happy to co-operate with Hitler for the good of a strong and united Germany. That was what really mattered to Christians in Germany in the 1930's and they were willing to turn a blind eye to the persecution of Jews, ethnic minorities and political opponents.

It was left to a small Confessing Church to oppose Nazism. One man has become a symbol of that opposition, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In the 1930s he was a leading member of the Confessing Church. His opposition to

the democratically elected German Government led to his being banned from teaching, being sacked from his lectureship in Berlin and eventually being banned from the capital city altogether. The seminary of which he was head was closed by the Government in 1937. When war broke out in 1939 he was on a lecture tour in the US. It was a clear opportunity for him to leave Germany for good and work to oppose Nazism in the west.

Instead he returned to his homeland. He attempted to mediate between Germans opposed to Hitler and the British Government, working through the then Bishop of Chichester. His efforts failed. He was arrested. As 1945 drew on Bonhoeffer from his prison cell could hear American guns as they came to liberate Germany. He was moved from concentration camp to concentration camp and on 9th April 1945 he was executed. Four weeks later the Germans surrendered and the war was over. But Bonhoeffer and millions of others were dead.

Bonhoeffer died because he knew the difference between the authority of Christ and the authority of man. The majority of good German Christians did not.

It is not very likely that we will face choices quite so dramatic as those of German Christians in the 1930's. But we do face crises of authority. Two strike me. I referred to one two weeks ago to the danger of accepting scientific explanations as the be all and end of truth. This is the opposite mistake from those fundamental Christians who reject the theory of evolution. This mistake is to assume that science, whether it be the theory of evolution, or medicine, offers a complete picture. Two weeks ago I suggested to you that thinking of a person with dementia in terms of the loss of intellectual powers reduces human beings to collections of symptoms and leads us to treat them in a mechanical way. We have the authority of Christ to claim that those with severe dementia are still made in the image of God. Jesus showed no hesitation in ministering to lepers who were regarded by his fellow Jews as being ritually unclean.

We could also make the same mistake with regard to evolution. You and I are motivated by evolutionary instincts that enable us to survive. And if that was all we saw in human life we could justify murder and rampant

casual sex. We have the authority of Christ to say that there is more to us than that. He did not condemn the woman taken in adultery. But he did tell her to sin no more.

But the other crisis of authority relates to the questions of autonomy. There is a very strong assumption in western society that the rights of the individual are paramount. This has led to radical changes in attitude with regard to abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and end of life care. The Christian insight into this is that the rights of the individual must be balanced against the effects on society as a whole. This is the meaning of the commandments to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is the meaning of the parable of the sheep and the goats. If we do this we may come to different conclusions. And we may not. Some liberal attitudes may be justified – but on grounds other than personal autonomy.

The authority of Christ arises from his love and his power. Christ demands our allegiance not through the threat of hell fire; nor through the kind of coercion used by all human authority. Christ commands our obedience through the power of the cross, the power of his self sacrificing death. That is the kind of king that Jesus is. That is the kind of kingdom over which he rules. Unlike any human kingdom, anyone can join, but no-one is compelled.

Under whose authority will you place yourself ?

N Clews

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