

Philippians 2:1-11

Psalm 25

Matthew 21:23-27

Authority as integrity

In a sentence:

We are true to our calling when our words and actions reflect our convictions

The divided self

In our gospel reading today, the elders and the chief priests demand of Jesus, By what authority do you do these things? (“these things” including the overthrowing of the temple marketplace). Rather than answering directly, Jesus poses a counter-question about the perceived authority of John the Baptist, now dead. Fearful of the consequences of answering honestly, the elders and priests are forced into a public and dishonest agnosticism: “...we do not know about John’s authority...”

The *public* nature of their refusal to know is critical. They know very well, of course, what they think privately but they dare not think this out loud. In this dishonest turn, the elders sever the relationship between their “internal” and “external” selves: what I am in myself and what I am in public are here two different things. My private self is created by my thoughts, experiences, emotions, desires, and so on. My public self is what I think I need to be to *protect* my private self. The elders and the chief priests defend themselves in their private beliefs by refusing to have a public opinion about John.

Most of us do the same. We can be different in ourselves from what we are in public. I don’t mean here to things that are properly personal and inappropriate for public spaces. I mean rather those circumstances when we find ourselves doing the kinds of calculations the chief priests and the elders do in response to Jesus: knowing what we think but sparing ourselves the grief which would come from speaking it, *choosing* to divide ourselves into two identities – the self I think I *know* and the self I *show*. God gives us each one face, and we divide it into two, each side looking in different directions, each ear listening for different things. Jesus’ challenge to the religious leaders (and to us) leads to a similar affirmation to what we considered a couple of weeks ago – that we are what we do in the dark. When we speak of a person as having integrity, we mean that she is in the light as she is in the dark.

Authority as integrity

The clash in our reading today is not quite about personal integrity but is about authority. The effect of Jesus’ response here is to assert that authority rises from a single voice, from both ears hearing the same thing. Jesus’ opponents – with most of us – know two authorities, while Jesus himself knows only one. Jesus’ authority is founded on the cohesion of his inner life and outer ministry. In contrast, the priests and the elders – and we with them – are *divided* in themselves; they are spiritually “schizophrenic” (Greek: “divided mind”), subject to multiple voices. Our authority evaporates in our dissembling and deception, for we are shown to be divided.

Such dishonesty about myself before others arises from fear: I don’t trust the world with my true self. And perhaps this seems to be fair enough: the world is a dangerous place and a self-preserving instinct does not always deny God or our true selves.

Yet, dishonesty like this does not only arise from fear but also gives *rise to fear*, because no one really knows what's lurking beneath the visible surface. We are what we do in the dark, and we have reason to fear what that is. This fear breeds dishonesty, duplicity and suspicion, and all this dissolves community.

In contrast, being the same in myself as I am in public gives rise to love and trust. This is not easy and is often dangerous. I have to put myself at risk by revealing who I am so that you can know what to expect from me when the relationship between public and private is pressed.

Now, all of this is very nice, but it's just not how the world works. And so we suffer and find we cannot trust. The debates about the Voice at the moment, our constant preparation for war, our refusal to act decisively in relation what might be a looming climate catastrophe – these have to do with the absence of authority, the lack integrity.

The cross as authority

The touchstone in Christian confession for understanding this tension in us is the cross of Christ. The cross is Jesus subject to the effect of what is revealed in the debate about authority in today's Gospel text. The religious leaders, divided as they are in themselves, reject the possibility that what Jesus says and does is integrated with God, and he is crucified. The cross marks the powerlessness of divine authority in the face of worldly power. And the story should simply end here – one more tragic effect of human fear and loathing. And it would, were it not for Easter – for the resurrection.

This is not to say that the resurrection is a happy ending for Jesus which promises us also that, whatever happens, we'll end up smiling. That might be true but it's not very interesting, because we have to live here and now, not there and then. The resurrection of Jesus is not a happy ending but the invitation to look again at the cross, now not as failure but as triumph.

The gospel sees the cross as the sign of Jesus' authority – the sign of his integration of inner call and outer action. On the cross, Jesus remains true to his calling, which is *not* to be crucified but, in all circumstance, to be true to the God who sent him. This integrity with his calling, however, is not a "power"; it is authority as authentic being. Power, in the sense we usually mean, springs from the kind of division in the leaders as they avoid the truth in responding to Jesus. Our division of ourselves is an act of power – a manipulation – and this kills.

The cross is powerlessness; there are no two ways about it. In terms of worldly power, there is nothing to see in the cross but the tragic crushing – again – of the powerless. But the gospel is not about power but about authority and authenticity; on the cross, Jesus stays true despite the divided self of the world.

This hardly seems like good news. When Jesus calls us, someone said, he bids us, Come and die. Only those who lose their life will save it. *Is this good news?* It is only good news against the backdrop of two things we don't often admit. The first is that we are going to die anyway, and the second is that the divided self of an inner heart hiding behind an outer façade is its own kind of premature death. In light of this, the question becomes, Where is true life to be found?

Authored by God

The gospel's response is that true life is found in integrity. The cross is where Jesus triumphs in the face of evil by being true to the love of God. And so, for Christian confession, the cross is the authoritative event in human history. The resurrection is the evidence that true human being is possible even in a death on a cross (Philippians 2). And so it is here that true human being is *authored*. Here, God writes (with a "w") what

we are to be, for we are to live as if the world of duplicity and disintegration cannot keep God out.

Authority in Christian confession is anything which declares that God will be near even in death and decay.

God will be near when bombs explode and forests burn and referendums fail.

God will be near when she dies, and when the church doors close for the last time, and when the divorce papers are signed.

God will be near when the diagnosis comes, when the weight of shame threatens to crush, when the money falls short.

By what authority does Jesus do what he does? Who “authors” him?

Jesus – rejoicing with his friends, clashing with opponents or gasping on the cross – is authored by God.

And so also for us. Our authority – our integrity – springs from being and doing what God calls us to be and to do. Our faith is true when it is matched in our actions.

This is what God honours.
