

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 65”

Matthew 21:23-27

We're moving on in Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus, it's the Monday or Tuesday before Easter. You'll remember that Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Sunday to the acclamation of the vast crowds which had flocked to the capital to celebrate Passover, crowds with an expectation of a coming Messiah, one who would fulfil the predictions of the Hebrew prophets, preachers and poets, and usher in the Kingdom of God which had been promised to them for so many centuries. Jesus had, indeed, given them all glimpses of the Kingdom, but it wasn't quite what everyone was expecting. After the odd little episode with the fig tree which we considered last Sunday, Jesus is teaching in the Temple courts – a favourite spot for preachers.

So we find him speaking with the worshippers who were flocking into the Temple during the week of the Passover Festival, when a group of important people arrive. These are members of the Sanhedrin, the council which effectively ran Jerusalem and administered the Temple. It's often translated "*council*" in our English versions and it was the highest tribunal in the land. Traditionally, its origins lie in the seventy elders whom Moses appointed to assist him but it underwent many changes during the centuries. By the time of Jesus it had very wide jurisdiction in religious and civil matters. That's evidenced by the composition of it – the chief priests, who looked after the Temple and the religious ritual; the teachers of the Law, who were the theologians; and the elders, who were neither priestly nor rabbinical, but tended to be distinguished or wealthy men (such as Joseph of Arimathea) who were appointed to the Council. I suppose in Lichfield it would be like a council made up of the Dean and Chapter (who looked after the religious life), the City Council (who looked after the traditions) and the District Council (who sort out all the day-to-day administration), with a few of the Police thrown in for good measure.

Anyway, these people are understandably upset over what Jesus has done in the Temple. No-one is allowed to interfere in the working of the Temple and here is Jesus who has stormed in and driven out the tradesmen and money-lenders, whilst shouting verses from the Scriptures at them. He is an interloper and an interloper. And so, quite understandably, they want to know where his authority has come from. It's a question about power and about money. Jesus has usurped their power; they have lost control in this situation. And he has affected their profits. The people who have been turned out of the Temple will themselves have complained, no doubt, and the Temple authorities will have lost their revenue for letting the stalls. The question they ask is just the surface of a simmering pool of jealousy, resentment and frustration.

We still ask those questions of each other, don't we? "What right has he got to do that?" "Why is she getting involved here?" Usually those questions are asked when we feel our own power base being

threatened. We are suspicious of others' motives. And really it's all down to pride and jealousy. We don't want anyone else walking on our patch and spoiling our chances of kudos, of attention, even of money. You can't really blame the leaders of the Jews for asking this question, can you? They have standards to maintain, people to keep pleased, their positions to uphold. But Jesus is able to expose the thinking behind their question, as he always does.

And many people still ask the question, not of each other, but of Jesus – what's his authority? Why believe him? You see, in recent years authority has become something of a derogatory word. There's some justification for that shift as we have seen authority abused in all kinds of situations from Hitler to children's home child abusers, from colonial governors to violent husbands. Authority is linked with power, and power is linked to corruption in the minds of many people. So why accept the authority of Jesus? What right has he to be listened to and obeyed over what anyone else has to say? The question many people ask is really the same one that these leaders were asking – what right has Jesus got to get involved on my patch?

Well, Jesus gives a very canny reply. He asks them about John the Baptist. Now, John the Baptist was a popular figure amongst the people. He had been killed within the last three years, so his memory was still very much alive. Indeed, the reputation of some figures actually grows after their death, so John was probably already becoming an almost mythological, heroic figure. He had had his difficulties with the religious and civil authorities. He was a relative of Jesus Christ. And he had pointed to Jesus as the promised Messiah, in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. In a sense Jesus is identifying himself with John and he says to the questioners, "Well, what about John's authority? Where do *you* stand on that? You tell me that first, and I'll tell you all about my authority." It was a fairly normal way of holding a debate in those days. If one person asked a question, you would reply with another which was an attempt to winkle out a bit of what lay behind the original enquiry. (You still hear it amongst Jewish people today: "How are you?" "You're asking me how I am?")

Well, that gives them cause to stop and think. They would have got into a little huddle and discussed their answer. If you watch any of the screen versions of the life of Jesus – for example, the Zeffirelli film *Jesus of Nazareth* or Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* – you'll notice that the leaders always go around in groups and have to stop and talk about things whenever they are going to reply. There's obviously an official line on everything and no-one can step beyond the boundaries of the right response. It's a bit like New Labour two thousand years before its time (anyone remember New Labour?): they need to make sure they're all "on message"!

Jesus' question gives them two alternatives – John's authority for baptism and, by implication, everything else he did, came either from God or was devised by the mind of man. What can they reply? If they answer that it was God-ordained then Jesus is going to ask a supplementary question challenging them as to why they haven't taken anything he said seriously – and, again by implication, his heralding of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Messiah. And they'll also have to swallow a lot about the times when John called them "*vipers*" and other nasty things.

On the other hand, they can say that it was all a humanly conceived idea, that John was just another of the weird and wonderful travelling preachers doing his own thing. If they do that, they run the risk of conceding in front of a large crowd of people (who don't really consider them flavour of the month anyway) that one of the popular heroes of recent years was a charlatan and a deceiver. They are on the horns of a dilemma – and yet they are supposed to be the wise and discerning amongst the people, the ones on whom everyone else is supposed to rely for spiritual and legal advice. Whatever they say will expose their insincerity in some way or other and leave them open to ridicule (or worse) by Jesus and the people.

In the end they take the way of least embarrassment – although what they have to say is still pretty humiliating for the wisest heads among the people. "Sorry," they say, "we don't know where John's authority comes from." So Jesus refuses to reply to their question. And that's not a petulant, school playground sort of reply. It's what you'd expect in this situation.

The leaders' attempt to lead Jesus into a trap has failed. They were hoping that, in front of all these listeners, his answer to their question would drive him into a corner, exposing him as an unlawful intruder into the life of the Temple and thus effectively negating any of his claims to Messiahship. Not only has the trap failed, but Jesus has laid bare their insincerity and their incompetence to act as spiritual leaders. On such an important matter on which the people urgently needed some kind of guidance, they have answered that they don't know. They showed that they had forfeited their right to be regarded as teachers of the people – again a question of authority: Jesus speaks with acknowledged authority (that has been noted by Matthew already: *Matthew 7:28,29; 13:54*); they don't – and so they no longer have the right to question him about his actions. What his refusal to reply to them is actually saying is that, if they don't recognise authority when they see it (in John, for example), then no amount of arguing and debating is going to convince them of it, so there's no point replying. The parable we'll look at next time is another part of his response – in refusing to recognise his authority, they have nullified their own.

So, as we see that the leaders here can't have their cake and eat it (so to speak), we see the same is still true of those who question Jesus' authority and lordship. Many, many people today ask what right Jesus

has to expect our obedience. Why should we obey him? What right has he to demand exclusive allegiance? And what right have Christians to try and convince others of the necessity of following him? Yet most, if not all, of those very same people will talk in glowing terms of the Sermon on the Mount and acknowledge that Jesus was a great teacher, a good example. Well, if he was a great moral teacher, you can't then pick and choose which bits you're going to accept and which bits you're going to reject. The same person who said that we should love our neighbour also said he was the only way to God. The same person who talked about humility also talked about a pretty nasty eternity for those who don't believe in him. If he was lying in some of those things, then we cannot claim him as a great moral teacher. In a sense, it's all or nothing, what C S Lewis calls, in *Mere Christianity*, "The Shocking Alternative". Although many of you have heard me quote them before, listen again to these words from that chapter and I hope you'll see what I mean (*Mere Christianity* pp51,52).

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Do you see? If Jesus has no authority, if that authority doesn't come from God, then we have nothing to rely on. We cannot accept his forgiveness. We cannot take *any* of his teaching seriously. We cannot speak with any authority about him ourselves. He is just another poor deluded man who thinks he's a god – no different from Augustus Caesar, Nero, Pol Pot or Hitler. Or he's just another preacher man pointing us towards one god among many others and what we have to say about him is as valid as what anyone says about any other god. That, of course, is patent nonsense, because you don't have to have a degree in comparative religion to see that they can't all be right – they say completely different things about life, death and redemption.

On the other hand, of course, if Jesus does have authority from God, then he doesn't just deserve our passing acknowledgement, he demands our unhesitating obedience and worship. If he is who he says he is and comes with the authority he says he does, then we have to bow down before him and submit to that authority. There is no halfway house.

The question we are confronted with today is the same question Jesus put to the leaders, but with Jesus substituted for John. Where does Jesus' authority come from – God or man? If it's man, then don't touch it with a barge-pole. If it's from God – and, in case you hadn't worked it out, I passionately believe it is – then acknowledge it, submit to it and live your life in the light of it. There really is no other alternative!

If you don't think you know enough about Jesus to make that kind of decision, then have a word with me afterwards, or go along to Andrew's *Glad You Asked* group and explore a bit more what Jesus is really all about.

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Jesus is teaching in the Temple courts when a group of important people arrive. These are members of the Sanhedrin, which effectively ran Jerusalem and administered the Temple. They are understandably upset over what Jesus has done in the Temple. Earlier in the week Jesus stormed in and drove out the tradesmen and money-lenders, whilst shouting verses from the Scriptures at them. The question they ask about his authority is just the surface of a simmering pool of jealousy, resentment and frustration.

So Jesus asks them about John the Baptist, a popular figure amongst the people, whose memory was still very much alive. That gives them cause to stop and think and they got into a little huddle to discuss their answer. Jesus' question offers two alternatives – John's authority for baptism and, by implication, everything else he did, came either from God or was devised by the mind of man.

What can they reply? If they answer that it was God-ordained, then Jesus is going to ask a supplementary question challenging them as to why they haven't taken anything he said seriously – and, again by implication, his heralding of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Messiah. And they'll also have to swallow a lot about the times when John called them "*vipers*" and other nasty things.

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If Jesus has no authority, if that authority doesn't come from God, then we have nothing to rely on. We cannot accept his forgiveness. We cannot take *any* of his teaching seriously. But, if Jesus does have authority from God, then he doesn't just deserve our passing acknowledgement, he demands our unhesitating obedience and worship. If he is who he says he is and comes with the authority he says he does, then we have to bow down before him and submit to that authority.

Questions for discussion

1. Why were the leaders and officials so eager to question Jesus? Weren't they simply doing their job?
2. Why are many people prepared to accept part of what Jesus said but not all? Why is there a reluctance to accept his authority as divine? (Look at C S Lewis's words in *Mere Christianity* <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/801500-mere-christianity>)

3. If we do accept Jesus' authority as coming from God, what are the implications for us?
4. Why doesn't Jesus respond directly to their question (v27)?
5. What one thing have you learned about Jesus from this passage? What will you do about it?