

Sunday 28 September 2008: The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

By what authority?

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?". The Lord said to Moses, " Go. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Outside in St Martin's Place, just near the steps, there was, until yesterday, a large block of concrete. It appeared on Thursday, and I think most of us assumed initially that it was something to do with the replacement of lampposts and the new paving work. We've discovered since that Colin Midlane, one of our NSMs here, actually witnessed it being delivered, by a few men in a lorry with a hoist. When Colin asked them what they were doing, they said "Reclaiming the streets"!

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Realising now that is some sort of street art stunt that has also seen blocks of stone appear in other parts of London, I thought I'd look up "Reclaim the streets" on the internet. Their website describes them as "*a direct action network for global and local social-ecological revolution(s) to transcend hierarchical and authoritarian society, (capitalism included), and still be home in time for tea...*"

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Who's in charge? Who really runs this *hierarchical and authoritarian society* that a block of stone out on the pavement seeks to challenge? By what authority are "they", whoever they are, making the decisions they make and who gave them this authority?

The answers to those sort of questions are not as obvious as they might seem. I have to say that as I've been pondering the readings for today, the thought of climbing the pulpit steps and saying something on the theme of authority filled me with even more trepidation than preaching usually does.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

That's a question that every preacher should ask themselves before they sit down to prepare a sermon and again before they stand up to deliver it.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

That's a question that every priest who stands at the altar and presides over that great mystery of Christ present in bread and wine, or who delivers the words "your sins are forgiven" should ask themselves time and time again.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

And having asked that question, we beg for grace to fulfil this calling and to be able to exercise the authority placed in us by the mystery that is God's church.

Having authority whether in a public role, or in the context of family life also brings with it responsibility to exercise that authority for the benefit of those for whom we are called to care and serve. There's always a danger that authority can be self-serving, exercised largely for the benefit of the office holder.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

That danger is at the heart of the clash between Jesus and the Jewish elders that we heard about in the Gospel reading today. Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey being hailed by the people with shouts of Hosanna as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. He cured the sick, he entered the Temple and began to teach the people. At a human level of course the response of the Jewish leaders is understandable. Who was this man? What right had he to stand up and claim the authority to speak in God's name in such a public way and in such a symbolic place? If our friends from Reclaim the Streets had chosen to dump their concrete block in the centre of the aisle during this service, stand on it and start preaching, I imagine there would be a degree of nervousness from the clergy, churchwardens and PCC and we might feel entitled to ask "who gave you the right to do that?"

But Jesus response to their question is to ask them what seems a straightforward question but what is actually a searching challenge to what had become the self-serving nature of their own exercise of authority. If they answered it honestly then the corrupt nature of the way they exercised authority would be exposed, so better not to answer it at all.

Jesus said to them, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

Self-protection wins the day over the responsibility to use their authority well and wisely.

But responsibility for the wise use of authority lies not only with the people in authority. It lies also with those who place others in positions of responsibility and ask them to lead. It's very easy to talk about "them" – the people in charge and say "why don't they do something about....." assuming we have no responsibility for whatever the issue is. And yet the reality is that "they", who supposedly have all the power and authority often feel as powerless as the rest of us.

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

When I became Associate Vicar here a few years ago, Nick Holtam said to me "there will be times in this job when you feel you have all the responsibility and none of the authority". He was right! But I don't believe for one moment that experience is unique to associate vicars at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. I imagine there are countless people from Moses to prime ministers in the grip of a global economic crisis to the frantic and desperate parents of wayward teenagers who can share that experience. And even as we say farewell to Nick Danks today, I imagine it's common experience of conductors, from the Berlin Philharmonic through to Directors of Music at St Martin-in-the-Fields, to often feel they have all the responsibility and none of the authority! And anyone who has ever been in a position of making a decision on behalf of others will have some inkling of how Moses felt being on the receiving end of complaints he felt powerless to address.

And the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

“Who’s in charge”, “where does power lie?” *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”* are complex, perhaps unanswerable questions, clouded with the shared human experience of powerlessness, whatever our standing in society may be.

At the end of this service, we are commanded to “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord”. The God who commands to break bread and share wine in remembrance of him, and in so doing feeds us with himself and makes us his people, then sends us out. But he sends us out not just as Liz, or Richard, or Nick or John or Mary or Jo or whoever we are. Important though our individual identities are, our response to his command is to know that we go “in the name of Christ”. We go out with the authority of Christ, Christ rejected, Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ glorified. We go carrying both our human powerlessness and our knowledge that we are forgiven and redeemed people, endowed with both the authority and the responsibility of building God’s kingdom today; an authority given not for our benefit but that we might serve God’s world – that we might strike the rock that people may drink. The church is never “them” but us. “They” alone are never the builders of the Kingdom, for we are God’s people. And however inadequate or unprepared or unworthy we may feel, Christ has made us his own, and given us the authority to fulfil that calling.

The Lord said to Moses, "Go....Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

In the name of Christ. Amen.