

By What Authority?

A sermon on Matthew 21:23-32 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 October 2017

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Message

The marriage equality debate raises questions about authority, but prophetic authority is not proved by fidelity to past rules, but by its power to produce a harvest of new life and love among the people.

Sermon

It has been an interesting week. Last week's sermon about marriage equality went viral on social media, and as a result, I've spent a fair chunk of the week answering comments and questions online and responding to various forms of media. I even did an interview for SBS radio that went to air overdubbed in Mandarin Chinese so, when I listened to it, even I couldn't understand what I was talking about!

I know that many people who have spoken up on either side of this issue have been subjected to some pretty hostile and nasty responses, but fortunately, that hasn't been my experience this week. The overwhelming majority of the reactions and comments have been positive and affirming, and those who have expressed their disagreement with what I said have mostly been quite civil and respectful about it. A few have called me a liar or a false prophet or even just a fool, but nothing nastier than that, and I've been called those things for decades without having yet found myself cut off from God and cast into the outer darkness.

One of the more serious things that has been raised in various ways by a few of those who have taken exception to what I said is the question of authority. As one respondent put it, "I do not believe you have any authority to say these things, especially as a teacher of the Word." The question of what authority I have to teach the things I teach is actually a perfectly fair question, and it deserves a serious answer.

But while I was reflecting on it, I also had to find some time to begin reflecting on the scripture readings set for today so that I could prepare tonight's sermon, and lo and behold, there was the same question again. "The chief priests and the elders of the people came to Jesus as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

The things that Jesus was doing about which they are asking probably include both his teaching of the people, and his provocative symbolic closing down of the temple sacrificial system, overturning the tables and chasing out the merchants, because that had just happened in the previous story. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

I too am allegedly overturning things which many religious people think I should not be overturning. Hence the question put to me: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Now the fact that I am being challenged with the same question as Jesus doesn't prove anything at all. It is entirely possible that Jesus has a good answer to that question and that I don't. Although the problem that we have is that Jesus doesn't actually answer the question. He asks his interrogators a question of his own, and when they opt not to answer, he follows suit and excuses himself from answering their question. Fortunately though, the question he asks of them, and the story he follows it up with

give us some pretty good hints as to his answer. And since we are all called to model ourselves on Jesus – a theme that was more explicit in our reading from the letter to the Philippians (2:1-13) – that should also provide some direction for an answer about my authority to teach and preach as I do.

The question Jesus asked was where they thought John the Baptist's authority came from. "You want to know where my authority comes from. Tell me first where you think John's came from. Was it from God or not?"

Now apart from the reported fact that this question left them between a rock and a hard place because either answer snookered them, the question itself tells us quite a lot about Jesus's approach to authority. The mainstream approach to authority among the religious people of Jesus's day was that it was all about the biblical law. The scribes, the experts in biblical law, held considerable authority, and most of the other authority figures, especially the priests but also the kings, were seen as holding an authority that was legislated for in the biblical law. So when Jesus was asked about his authority, the expectation was that he should try to defend his authority on the basis of the biblical law, either by identifying himself as a biblically mandated authority figure, perhaps even the messiah, or by showing that everything that he did and taught was simply biblical.

But although this was the mainstream view, and it often still is since it was implied in many of those who questioned my authority this week, there was a problem with this view. And Jesus's question about the authority of John the Baptist goes straight to the heart of it. The problem was that all the way through Israel's history, there had been another line of authority, another group of people who spoke authoritatively on behalf of God. They were the prophets. And as Jesus had pointed out a number of times, pretty much all of the most important prophets had been opposed by the religious mainstream of their day. Not just opposed, but often rejected and killed. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

Frequently the criticism of the prophets by the religious mainstream was that they taught things that were contrary to biblical law, and that charge was frequently quite true. One of the things that Jesus often quoted from the prophets was the saying that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. There is absolutely no question at all that the biblical law said that God demands sacrifices, but the prophets said no, not sacrifice but mercy. And Jesus agreed.

John the baptiser was regarded by the people as a prophet, so Jesus's question about him was a question about whether they acknowledged that the prophets too carried the authority of God. And of course, Jesus's own action of shutting down the temple system the previous day was a classic example of symbolic protest in the tradition of the prophets. If they acknowledged that John was a prophet from God, then they would have trouble denying the same about Jesus.

So where does that leave us? Clearly Jesus saw his authority as being the same as the authority of the prophets, but that is always a complicated and contentious form of authority. The biblical record shows that it is almost always only recognised with hindsight, after the death of the prophet. I guess Jesus knew what he had coming to him. Where does that leave us on the question of authority, and can I too answer my challengers with some sort of claim to prophetic authority?

I think that by appealing to the example of John, Jesus is acknowledging that the words of prophets can't be validated simply by their conformity to the biblical laws. And certainly for me, I acknowledge that the things that I have said about same-sex marriage are not things that the Bible says. I have [published an explanation](#) of how I think a serious reading of the Bible can lead to the conclusions that I have reached, but I realise that, like Jesus, I am attempting to say, "You have heard that the law said ... , but I say unto you." That's always a risky place to stand. You can get yourself crucified if you try to stand there. But as the prophet Jeremiah (20:9) put it, "If I try to be silent, the word becomes like a burning fire within me," and as the prophet Martin Luther put it, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

But how then are we to judge the truth of a prophet or a prophetic teaching? Jesus alludes to an answer here in our passage with his story about the two sons, but because he is not directly answering the question put to him, his answer is a bit veiled, so I want to interpret it by putting it alongside a more direct teaching he gives on the subject in his sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:15-23).

There he begins by saying, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." That line has been quoted at me several times this week by people who are sure that it describes me. But none of them have continued on with what Jesus then says. Because he doesn't say "You will know the true prophets by their strict conformity with a traditional interpretation of the biblical law." He says, "You will know them by their fruits. ... Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ... Thus you will know them by their fruits."

This then is essentially the same thing that Jesus is saying in his parable of the two sons in tonight's reading. One son says all the right things when his father asks something of him, but he doesn't follow through on it. Bad fruit. The other son initially appears to be disobedient, but then has a change of heart and does what his father wants. Good fruit. The one who actually does the will of the father is not the one who can say the right things and sound like he respects the commandment, but the one who bears good fruit.

Jesus then rams his point home by saying that the tax collectors (those who had betrayed their nation) and the prostitutes (those whose sexual behaviour was deemed to have cut them off from the love of God) were going in to the culture of God ahead of the chief priests and elders because they were responding to the call of the prophets and bearing good fruit instead of bearing nice-sounding words but bad fruits of judgementalism, hostility and self-righteousness. "Even when you saw these lives being changed," says Jesus, "you did not change your minds and believe the prophet."

My friends, I can't stand here and claim that everything I teach is perfectly true and to be trusted. I do my best. I pray. I study the scriptures. I try to open myself to the breeze of God's Spirit and allow it to carry me where it will. Sometimes I will get it wrong, and when you think I have got it wrong, I would encourage you to speak up and explain why.

But ultimately, I would ask you to judge me, not by whether I just repeat the usual biblical lines as understood by the religious mainstream, but by the fruits of my teaching. If my teaching is contributing to this church community growing in its love for God and for others,

and in its mercy and care for those who have been wounded and cast out by others, is that not good fruit? If my teaching is enabling people to discover the truth that they are deeply loved by God and to be set free to live out the culture of grace that is the kingdom of God, is that not good fruit?

Ultimately, it is what I sometimes call the “Jesus sniff test”. Does it smell like Jesus? You can use the Bible to defend stoning sexual sinners to death, but it doesn’t pass the Jesus sniff test (John 8:1-11, only the last few words of which seem to be popular with my critics!). The teachings of Jesus and the Apostles, recorded in the Bible itself, teach us to read the Bible through the lens of the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus; to apply the Jesus sniff test.

Does this teaching, or this way of expressing and applying a teaching seem to be consistent with the way that Jesus operated and expressed himself? Is it bearing the sorts of fruits that Jesus’s ministry produced, such as people who had previously been written off as god-forsaken sinners flocking to him and lapping up his gracious words and embracing the costly path of radical love, or is it, as some have alleged this week, producing an insipid bunch of lukewarm backsliders who don’t stand for anything and just pander to the values of the world around them? Look and see and judge for yourselves.

My friends, if you need a church community that will always conform to the accepted evangelical orthodoxies, this is probably not the place for you. But, at the risk of sounding hopelessly self-righteous myself (guilty as charged!), if you will judge our biblical interpretation and teaching and the quality of our shared life, prayer and ministry by its fruits, this just may be the place that your soul hungers for, and here at this table, you may find yourself embraced in the loving arms of Jesus and fed and nourished for life in all its fullness.