

“By What Authority?”

Mark 11:27-33

February 11, 2007

As we continue through the gospel of Mark, we are going to jump ahead briefly. What normally would follow last week's text is the Palm Sunday account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We are going to hold off on that until – well, you guessed it – Palm Sunday. Instead, we are going to move into that last week of Jesus' life, looking at his teaching, his confrontations with the authorities, and his Passion.

By the way, do you know why we call it Christ's “Passion?” I was reminded of this when reading an article by Lloyd Ogilve, former pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian and Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. Ogilve wrote,

Acts 1:3 is a fulcrum text: “He [Christ] presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs.” Here, *pathein* [the word for suffering] is the second aorist active (a Greek tense) of *pascho* [the word for passion]. *Pathein* is also used in Acts 17:3 and 26:23 for Christ's suffering, his substitutionary vicarious sacrifice for the sins of the world.

(Ogilve, *Preaching With Passion*, Theology News and Notes, Winter 2007)

So with that introduction, let us turn to Mark 11:27-33.

The tension is high in Jerusalem. The city is packed with pilgrims; visitors from around the country who have come for the purpose of celebrating the Passover. Security is tight because the Romans – even though they allow these festivals – are concerned about the potential for violence and insurrection. News about Jesus has come into the city and the parade in his honor has only served to increase the anxious atmosphere within the city.

The next time Jesus comes into the city, the religious authorities are waiting for him. The three groups described here – the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders – make up the Sanhedrin, the same group that will later hold the trial for Jesus. They were the ones charged with the responsibility of governing activities in the temple. Jesus' parade on Palm Sunday, leading into the demonstration in the temple where Jesus overturned all the marketers' tables, was not something they approved or would allow.

“By what authority,” they ask, “are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” Essentially, this is the, “let me see your license...” conversation. They know that no one inside the temple establishment gave approval, so it is a trick question: either Jesus will say he did it without authority, which would hurt his cause; or, he will say that he has a God-given right to do it (which, ironically, he does), which will help their case against him for blasphemy.

Jesus, who is neither impressed by their presence or their demand, responds by saying, “Tell you what; I will ask you a question – answer me and I will answer you.”

1. Answering Jesus requires a decision.

What an opportunity the leaders missed! Jesus gives them an incredible opportunity: answer my question and I will answer yours. The only way to blow this chance was to not answer – and that is exactly what they did. “We don’t know.” In other words, they were unwilling to take a chance or make a decision. Yet Jesus did not say, “Answer me *rightly* and I will tell you;” he only commanded them, “answer me.” Would they submit to even this basic command from the LORD? No.

Further, it is telling that their reason for not answering was not for lack of information, but for lack of conviction. They come up with two potential responses but refuse to commit to either of them. The irony is – and it is a terrible irony – that they were the ones charged with the responsibility of protecting the temple worship from false prophets. Jesus’ question clarifies their deficiency with precision: if they say from “heaven”, they cannot justify how they rejected him; if they said “from human origin”, they fear how the crowd would react. In other words, when confronted with a prophet they did not understand, they chose to throw the temple under the bus and to try to protect themselves.

Let me repeat that: they did not lack any information, they lacked conviction. Everything they needed to know in order to make an answer was available to them; they all knew what Jesus was talking about. It was not as if they were in a position to ask honestly, “Who?” They knew who John the Baptist was.

This same condition exists in many people today – even people sitting in pews on Sunday mornings. They have never surrendered their lives to Jesus, they are content to sit and evaluate the quality of each Sunday morning’s worship service; good sermon, bad sermon, good music, bad music, etc. The problem is that answering Jesus requires a decision.

Jesus commands, “Answer me.” Your eternal salvation is not dependent upon the quality of the worship services you attend. If I preach a dog of a sermon and you get nothing from it, it does not excuse you from having a personal relationship with Jesus. If the choir/band sings a piece that does not please you or speak to you, it does not excuse you from serving Jesus Christ as the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Note that Jesus has turned the tables on the authorities. He has specifically not answered their question. He, in turn, has asserted his authority over them by posing the question and demanding an answer. They are required to answer him, he is not required to answer them.

Likewise, we are required to answer him; he is not required to answer us. Jesus asks you and asks me the same question every day, “Who do you say I am?” It is a question of commitment.

I used to travel a lot. Many travelers are talkative; I am not. So before the advent and ubiquity of the iPods, I had a number of discussions with people who – upon finding out that I was a minister – told me they “want to believe” in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but they just can not make up their minds. This happened several times; and going cross country on a plane allows for some open time to have more in depth conversations than you normally might.

“OK,” I would reply, “What is holding you back?”

“I have questions that I just can’t get past.”

“What kinds of questions?”

Normally, these questions had to do with seven-day creationism, virgin birth, or some other thing. “All right,” I would ask, “what else?” I would ask them to list ALL the question they had. Now, “if those questions were answered to your satisfaction, would you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

Hemming and hawing. Implicit is, “Ummm, no.” Why? Because it is not information people are lacking, it is conviction.

(Usually, at this point in the conversation on the plane, I could tell that they were looking to see if there were seats open and available for an escape.)

Faith requires a willingness to step out. It requires a willingness to be vulnerable. It requires a willingness to be wrong.

“Well, I do not want to become a Jesus freak or anything like that.” Why not? “Because I would lose all my friends and people will think I am weird.” All right; let’s say you won the lottery, would you *not* share your joy and tell your friends because you were afraid they would look at you differently? No. Would you care if other people thought you were weird? No.

Then why, if you are talking about receiving eternal salvation, your adoption as a child of God, your position as co-heir of the kingdom of heaven with Christ, why would you NOT want to share that with others?

It is not information people are lacking, it is conviction. We do not commit to Jesus because we are afraid. And that same fear prevents us from seeing the real Jesus.

2. Fear prevents us from seeing the real Jesus.

How do we know that this fear of being wrong and the lack of commitment was the root cause of the authorities’ refusal to answer Jesus? Because Mark tells us. They were afraid of Jesus’ answer if they said John’s authority came from heaven; they were afraid of the crowd’s response if they said that John was not a prophet. In other words, they were more afraid of the consequence of their answer than they were with what was the truth.

Fear. It is a powerful force. It is not rational. It is not something that we can get rid of simply by trying to think our way through it.

Humans fear many things: death, illness, teenagers, people who look different, languages we do not understand. We fear things that make us feel out of control.

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?" "Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."

We fear embarrassment, we fear failure, we fear letting down others whose opinions matter to us. We fear losing what we have, we fear having to change. We fear getting older, we are afraid that we will lose the ability to take care of ourselves.

The problem is that we fear those things more than we fear God. Yes, the fear of God is a *good* thing; it is the beginning of wisdom. It is the beginning of wisdom and not the end. Perfect love casts out fear – but that perfect love comes from an intimate knowledge of the loving one.

We tend to have those things backwards. We tend to take God's love for granted and fear those other things. But in doing so, we give those things more power and take our eyes off God. We make idols of them and worship and serve them – in fear – and fall away from worshiping God who is good.

3. Hungering for the truth means watching for the living God.

It is so easy to pick on the religious authorities because they are so neatly cast in the villains' role. Yet the flaw in their character is not so far away from us today. We need to be careful before we start feeling good about ourselves because "well, at least we are not like them."

The religious authorities knew the Scriptures. They knew and could recite chapter and verse about God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery. They knew the prophets. They knew about Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the temple. They knew the prophecies regarding the Messiah. So what was the problem?

They did not expect God to act in their midst. They did not expect God to show up. They knew what to look for, but did not recognize him when he actually came.

They wanted God to live up to their expectations. But God does not work that way. In Isaiah 55, God makes it abundantly clear that God does not act to meet our expectations. "Seek the LORD while he may be found," says the prophet. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

That is a statement of fact; not hyperbole or boasting.

Jesus needed no external authority on which to rely to do as he did or act as he acted. He embodied the authority to do those things. When the authorities' asked the question about Jesus' authority, they were not really looking for an answer. They just wanted him to stop. If he said the Law, they could engage him in an argument about the meaning of the law. If he cited any other

authority, they would dismiss it because it was necessarily lesser than the law. This was a win-win situation for them.

The one thing they were not prepared to handle was the truth. They mistook their responsibility to exercise authority from God to be the same thing as “owning” that authority. They were “the temple.” They thought that they were the authority.

Jesus’ question to them was an invitation to yield to his authority, to recognize the one who had given them authority. Their refusal showed they were more interested in preserving what they had rather than following where God would lead.

A few weeks ago, we read the story of the rich man who was more attached to his blessings than to the one who gives the blessings.

The church is more than me. I, your pastor, am not the church. These buildings are not the church. The programs are not the church. Peter’s confession and answer to Jesus’ question, “You are the Christ,” is the rock upon which the church is built. It is the foundation of who we are and what we do. That confession is the recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ; an expression of his authority over everything we do and everything we have.

When we say Jesus is Lord, we mean he is lord of everything: including our time, including our talent, including our treasures. We take offerings as a part of worship – because God commanded us to give, because God is the source of all we have, because we are children of God and are to act like him. What we have in our possession belongs to him; entirely.

So, when we take an offering during worship, we are responding to God’s command. Yes, those moneys go to support mission, evangelism, discipleship, programs, and ministries of this congregation; but that is a secondary consequence. If it is the primary purpose, we have made an idol of the “temple” – exactly the position that the authorities found themselves. However, when the primary purpose is to be obedient to God’s command and to recognize his authority, we live with the expectation we will be witnesses to what God is doing in our midst.

Conclusion

As we close this morning, I want to pose a few questions for all of us to consider and pray about:

1. Do we expect God to show up at Chula Vista Presbyterian Church? If so, how would we know?
2. Is the gospel worth sharing? If so, how are you and I sharing the good news with others in our day-to-day lives?
3. Is Jesus Christ the authority in your life or does something else cause you greater fear? If there is anything else more important in your life, I would invite you to come forward during the final hymn or after the service to pray with our Gardener ministers. If you have never committed yourself to receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I pray that the Holy Spirit is convicting your heart this morning and that you will do so. If Jesus

Christ is your Lord and Savior but you are struggling with some other power in your life, please come and together let us pray together that God would release you from it.

From here on out the focus of the gospel of Mark is on Jesus' passion: his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Jesus asks you and asks me the same question every day, "Who do you say I am?" It is a question of commitment. It is a question of authority.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:15 offering

10:00 offering