

In the rule of the Kingdom of God, Authority is De-powered

Reflecting on Matthew 21:23-32

In the 21st chapter of Matthew, we begin to read about the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem, we recognise a public parade of Jesus in protest against the Roman empire, which created a turmoil in the city. Later on, Jesus goes into the temple, creating a turmoil in the temple by overturning the tables of power and commerce in that sanctuary, which made the chief-priests and the scribes angry. Following that incident Matthew records the cursing of the fig tree in Bethany, when he found no fruit on it. In the first 22 verses of this chapter, we see an angry Jesus, who was angry against the empire and against the religious powers who were a crony to the empire. In verse 23, as he again enters into the temple and was teaching to the people there, the chief priests and the elders came to him and asked, “By what authority are you doing these (*above mentioned*) things, and who gave you this authority?”

The chief priests, the scribes and the elders of the temple have been waiting for an opportunity to corner Jesus, a Galilean man from Nazareth, for the kinds of disruptions and turmoil that he has been creating in their city, for they are angered by his actions. They now took this opportunity to confront him by questioning him about his authority. This question, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” exposes the fears and the insecurity of these religious authorities, for whom their identity is built around the notions of ‘authority.’ These religious authorities have assumed power and authority either by the legitimacy of their birth (priestly clan), or by their religious traditions of interpreting the scriptures or by being the representatives of the empire. They have always claimed to be the custodians of law, temple and religion, demonstrating their power and authority. When Jesus created a turmoil in Jerusalem by his public parade and by overturning the tables in the temple, the authority of these chief priests and the elders of the temple was at stake and so on their first encounter with Jesus they had to question about his authority. The word ‘authority’ is a loaded term, for there is so much power and privilege when someone claims it for themselves. So, when the religious authorities asked this question “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” to Jesus, they were conveying, “it is we the chief priests and the elders of the temple who control things here in Jerusalem, without our knowledge and permission no one can exercise power or authority, far be it for a powerless rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus answers these religious authorities by asking another question about the baptism of John, was it from heaven or was it of human origin? (25v) When they tried playing safe with their answer saying ‘we do not know’ (27v), Jesus replied that, “neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (27v). However, Jesus continued the conversation by narrating a parable of two sons (28-32v), which I read it as Matthew’s account of Luke’s ‘parable of the prodigal son’ as a clue to understand about authority, Jesus way. By sharing this parable, Jesus in a way was de-powering the authority of these religious authorities who boasted about their power and authority and affirms in the preference and priority of the powerless and outcasted communities in the Kingdom of God.

In this parable, we recognise that the father asks both his sons to go and work in his vineyard. Firstly, it is interesting to note that Jesus at the temple, talking to the chief priests and the elders of the temple did not choose a parable of speaking about a father who was a priest and requests his sons to go and help him as priesthood those days was understood to be a lineage affair, for those from the priestly tribe continued to be priests. However, Jesus by choosing to speak to the religious authorities about a parable of a farmer father who calls his sons to work in his vineyard,

Jesus was de-powering the authority of those priestly class and religious authorities, inviting them to look to the struggles of the peasant class in their own public sphere.

Secondly, the farmer father does not enforce authority on his sons, rather asks both his sons to go and work in the vineyard today (28v). For the religious authorities like that of the empire, authority was always understood as that is enforced, either by force or by violence or by levying huge taxes. In contrast to such an understanding of authority, Jesus presents a farmer father who requests his sons for help to work in the vineyard for that given day. So, for Jesus, authority is seeking and requesting for support and partnership in his work at the vineyard. Authority, in Jesus' way is not about power relations, where the powerful father dictates terms to his powerless sons, rather was about mutual partnership. Both the sons had the freedom of expression, a choice to express their views in this parable either to work or not to work. Authority in Jesus way is providing that freedom to express about their willingness or unwillingness, each according to their free will and choice. Authority in Jesus' way is not an enforcement of power, rather building trust and partnership in seeking mutual support in the ambience of freedom of choice, will and expression.

Thirdly, authority for Jesus is not in 'hypocritical obedience', projecting to be obedient to the word, but unfaithful to put that into action. When the father farmer requests both his sons for help, we see that the second son who impulsively replied "I go sir" (30v) to his request but did not turn up at the end. We recognise that the second son was exhibiting the traits of 'hypocritical obedience,' where he tries to please his father by words only and acts very contrary to what he has said. The chief priests and the elders of the temple have always tried to please everyone only by words, and their actions never matched to their words. Jesus by bringing this parable, was explaining it loud that authority, his way, is not like that of the chief priests and the elders of the temple, who display 'hypocritical obedience', where they project to be obedient but are not truthful to that obedience, who reply only on words, with a total mismatch to their deeds.

Fourthly, authority for Jesus is rather in the 'solidarity of action,' a willingness to help, assist, support and serve in the vineyard. We see the first son who initially replied "I will not" (29v) but later changed his mind and went to serve in the vineyard. Authority for Jesus is not in pleasing words and shouts, but in changing the mind and expressing it in a 'solidarity of action.' Jesus elsewhere said all those who say 'Lord, Lord' will not go into the kingdom of God, because for Jesus a solidarity of action, a willingness to work with him in the vineyard is all that matters. Authority, in Jesus' way is in changing the mind, supporting the farmer, taking on the struggle of the farmer, giving up one's own priority of work and in agreeing to work with the 'other' for the 'other'. The chief priests and the elders of the temple were only presenting themselves with long robes in the temples, living on the unjust temple taxes of the poor peasants. They never knew what it is to work in solidarity with the poor peasants, nor had an open heart and ears to the struggles of the peasantry in their land. Jesus by sharing this parable was de-powering the authority of the religious authority and was affirming in a new understanding of authority, which is in 'solidarity of action' with the struggling communities.

Fifthly, authority in Jesus' way is in offering a preferential option of the outcasts, with their conscious inclusion in the Kingdom of God. Jesus says in verse 31, "Truly, I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you." The tax-collectors and the prostitutes, were on the edge of the society, for they were hated and looked-down by the people, particularly the religious authorities. The temple authorities by exercising their power and authority always assumed and claimed positions to be the first in the temple and in the

society. On the contrary, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes were the ones to be first in the kingdom of God, though they were considered to be outcasts and polluting, and were treated as the least, the lost and the last in the society, for they have no power or authority of their own. But authority in Jesus' way is that the people who were considered the outcasts and the least, and who have no power or authority in the temple will be the ones who will be going into the kingdom of God ahead of the so called 'chosen', the religious authorities. Jesus again was de-powering the power and authority of the chief priests and the elders of the temple, by consciously including and offering preference to the least and powerless communities.

Finally, authority in Jesus way, is about changing the mind, willing to give up, choosing to be the least, practicing solidarity and humility, to be a church on the margins and subscribing to the authority of the divine, whose grace is upon all people irrespective of identities, for the cause of the kingdom of God. By narrating this parable, Jesus was nailing authority on its head, by de-powering the power and authority of the dominant groups, and by reversing it with the conscious inclusion of the outcasts and the excluded into the realm of God's rule and grace. So, the answer to the question "by whose authority Jesus was doing the things he was doing?" was that by the authority of the divine, whose rule of grace is a reversal to the powers and authorities of the dominant and powerful in the society, is an important learning for us as a church today.

The relevance of this text for us today is in abiding to the authority of the divine, whose rule of grace is in contesting the power and authority of the dominant and in affirming in a conscious inclusion of those on the margins of our society today. There are four models of churches that I recognise from this text for us today. Firstly, a church who boasts about their authority, history and authorised traditions, claiming to be the authority of faith and church, in so doing are closed to other faith perspectives and excluding the grace of God to many other people – like that of the chief priests and the elders of the temple. Secondly, a church who are only good at pleasing words, and whose actions mismatch to what they sing, pray, preach and offer – like that of the second son in the parable who said "I go sir" but did not go at the end. Thirdly, a church that is not impulsive and reactionary, but rather are critically reflective and are willing to express the love of Christ in solidarity of action – like that of the first son, who initially said "I will not go" but rather changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard. Fourthly, a church that consciously includes those that are pushed as outcasts and offers to be a church at the margins sharing grace to all of the creation, contesting power and celebrating life of all – like that of Jesus' preferential option of the tax-collectors and the prostitutes to enter the kingdom of God ahead of the many so called 'chosen.' Let us therefore, prayerfully introspect ourselves as churches and locate ourselves as a church to be with Jesus who is working untiringly on the margins of our society today. May God, whose authority is in giving up power be with each of us and help us to be a church relevant for our times today and make a difference in the world by working with Jesus in his vineyard of the world today. Amen.

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