

**Call to Worship**

These words based on Psalm 78 are for our thinking today: 'Let us incline our ears to the words of our Lord. In stories of old, in parables anew, may we find the teaching of God. May we be ever refreshed, by the abundant Word of life flowing like rivers of water from the generosity of God. Let us worship God, as one people united in love.'

**Hymn CH4 157 – Sing of the Lord's goodness,**

**Prayer of Adoration & Praise**

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

God of boundless love and unlimited grace, you turn the world inside-out and upside-down or is it the right way around? Jesus speaks to us of the first being last and the last being first. We wonder what it means to lose life to gain life. Paul calls us to feed our enemies and confound them with kindness. Show us the messy and marvellous path of love that will turn us inside-out and upside-down but also knowing it finally leads us the right way around.

For you Eternal God, are the font of every blessing. You are the life-giver, the water-finder, the path-maker. Beyond the wilderness of our wandering, in the spaces between where we were and where we are going, you are steadfast and faithful. Our quarrelling, our testing does not drive you away.

Beyond the wilderness, beyond our doubts, beyond our hopelessness your voice, your presence your faithfulness abides. Root us in your love in your steadfast loving-kindness that we may move beyond the doubt, beyond the hopelessness, beyond the wilderness and find our way home.

This we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our

sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

### **Reading: Matthew 21: 23 - 32 (taken from The Good News Translation)**

#### **The Question About Jesus' Authority**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus came back to the Temple; and as he taught, the chief priests and the elders came to him and asked, "What right do you have to do these things? Who gave you such right?"

<sup>24</sup> Jesus answered them, "I will ask you just one question, and if you give me an answer, I will tell you what right I have to do these things. <sup>25</sup> Where did John's right to baptize come from: was it from God or from human beings?"

They started to argue among themselves, "What shall we say? If we answer, 'From God,' he will say to us, 'Why, then, did you not believe John?' <sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'From human beings,' we are afraid of what the people might do, because they are all convinced that John was a prophet." <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you, then, by what right I do these things.

#### **The Parable of the Two Sons**

<sup>28</sup> "Now, what do you think? There was once a man who had two sons. He went to the older one and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> 'I don't want to,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. 'Yes, sir,' he answered, but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which one of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The older one," they answered.

So Jesus said to them, "I tell you: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.<sup>32</sup> For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this, you did not later change your minds and believe him."

## **Hymn CH4 356 – Meekness and Majesty**

### **Sermon – ‘Authority: Human & Divine’**

It was the week that Christians now call ‘Holy Week’. The palm branches from a couple of days before were still lying on the roads. The money changers whose tables had been overturned in the Temple are now setting up what they were able to salvage in the courtyard, whilst trying not to draw attention to themselves, as that crazy man Jesus might come back. They have never been so scared. Jesus is gathering His Disciples for another lesson about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Why? Well, Jesus knew that his time was ‘running out’ and so every word must count. The Temple was still the best place to teach His followers, even though Jesus knew the Elders and the Chief Priests did not appreciate the lessons He taught. Since he had been twelve years’ old, talking with the Rabbis, in this very place, His questions and ideas had disturbed those who led the Temple. Jesus was a threat to them, a very real threat, and deep within, they felt their authority being shaken. Yet, no other place will do for Jesus, so He leads His Disciples up from Bethany, straight to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Having heard our Gospel reading for today, can you imagine the frustration those priests and elders must have felt? This Jesus was always catching them out with their own words. Always making them look ‘foolish’ in front of the people. No matter how carefully they planned the exact wording of their questions, Jesus always escaped their ‘traps’. No matter how much time they spent scheming an arrest plan, Jesus could slip through their fingers, with just a word or two. It was both infuriating and frightening.

The Elders and the Priests enjoyed their power. They liked the respect shown to them in the streets and the markets. They loved being the ones in authority and here was this uneducated carpenter, teaching right under their noses and he sounds like He knows God more intimately than any human possibly could. This Jesus could easily turn the people against them. Away from the control of the Elders and the Priests. Jesus teaches with authority, but who had authorised Him? Certainly not them! Just Who did Jesus think He was?

Authority Issues. Have you ever known anyone with authority issues? For authority is the theme running our reading today. The Priests and the Elders have authority issues. The two sons challenge their father's authority. They are not the only ones with authority issues. For if we are honest, we all have authority issues, but I am not talking about authority issues in the way we usually understand them.

In our usual understanding of authority issues the obvious question in today's reading is whether we recognize and submit to the authority of Jesus and God. That question, however, is so obvious that I wonder if it is not the question at the heart of the reading. It is so obvious that I think there must be something more going on. To jump on that question as the obvious and only question to be answered only reveals our misunderstanding of what true authority is.

More often than not we are confused about authority. We misunderstand it to be based on credentials and expertise, a full CV, years of education, successes and accomplishments, status and reputation, or the position held in relationship to another. We assume that authority comes from outside a person and that it is given them by their circumstances. In this understanding some have authority and others do not.

"Who do you think you are?" "What gives you the right to tell me what to do?" Or to use a phrase that some children might use, "You're not the boss of me!" That represents our usual way of understanding authority issues. We do not like someone else teaching us, correcting us, or telling us what to do. We hear that in the challenge of the Chief priests and Elders to Jesus, "*What right do you have*

*to do these things? Who gave you such right?"* We see it in the refusal of the two sons to go to the vineyard.

There is, however, another authority issue at play. That issue is our failure and sometimes our refusal to recognise, claim, and exercise the authority within us; to go to the vineyard. That is the authority issue I feel is being held before us today.

So, let us take a moment to unpack this authority issue. If you think God is the boss of you, you have misunderstood authority. Let go of that idea. God is not the boss of you. God is not the boss of me. God is not the boss of us. God is our author. Every day God authorises us to enter and sends us into His vineyard, to act in this world with His authority and on His behalf through the gifts he has bestowed upon each one of us.

True authority always comes from within. It is an interior God-given quality not an exterior circumstance. That is what the Chief Priests and Elders failed to understand. I think that's why Jesus was always so aggravated with the religious leaders. They chose to exchange their God-given authority for human power. Sometimes we do too. That is what is happening in much of our world today.

In the absence of true authority there will always be power struggles. Look at the gridlocks that have occurred in our politics. Look at the wars throughout the world. Look at the conflicts in your own relationships. Those are about power, not authority. Our leaders exercise power but very few exercise authority. In the exercise of power, we look to our own interests but in the exercise of authority we look to the interests of others.

Think about the people who hold authority for you. They are not concerned about themselves. They do not dominate or control you. They inspire you. They call forth from you faith, hope, and trust. They expand your world, open new possibilities, and bring forth life and reveal gifts in yourself that you never knew were there. They cause you to re-evaluate your life, change your mind, and live differently. That sounds an awful lot like Jesus, and it is quite different from those who exercise power.

I will always be grateful to my probation supervisor, Campbell. Why? Well, when I went to Balshagray Victoria Park Parish Church on Broomhill Cross here in Glasgow, Campbell did not act with power but with authority. His silence, listening, presence, and wisdom are not just his personality traits, they are divine attributes in his life, gifts God had bestowed upon him, that created space and place for me and for others, that invited us to learn and discover our own authority, that showed us the way to the vineyard of our lives.

There are also people in our congregation, here in Eastwood who have no leadership position, title, or theological qualification and yet they have such great authority. I see it in their compassion and gentleness. I hear it in the way they pray. I feel it in their love for me and others. They too show me the way to the vineyard of my life. That is what authorities do. Yet, it is not about them. It does not come from them.

All authority originates in God, but it is not exclusive to God. God shares His authority with us. The authority God shares with us is nothing less than His own divine attributes. It is the expression and manifestation of God's life in and through our own.

That shared authority exists in us and is revealed by us as the many and varied gifts, God has given to each of us. That means every one of us has authority. As the Minister I do not have more authority than you. I do not have better authority than you. I just have a different authority. God gives each of us gifts and authority unique to our lives. God is generous, extravagant, with the gifts He gives and the authority He shares. We all have God-given gifts and authority. There is no one without authority. The difference is not that some have authority and others do not. The difference is that some recognize and exercise their authority and others do not. Regardless, God knows and sees the authority he has given us and waits for us to see and know it too. And when we do, we change our mind and go to the vineyard.

So, let me push you a little bit more on your authority issues, okay? What is the authority God has given you? What gifts, what divine attributes, has God

bestowed upon you? Are you living from that authority and sharing those gifts? Have you gone to the vineyard or are you simply mouthing the answers you think God wants to hear?

In the last week, our congregations' 'official' participation in the Church of Scotland's Path of Renewal movement came to an end. Yet, that does not mean that our commitment to God and to getting alongside the community which surrounds us should also end. What we do now is what counts. For the pandemic we are living through now, should cause us to recommit ourselves as faithful followers of Jesus. Why? So, that our witness, our lives draws the attention of people who need reaching. People who, when everyone and everything seems to be going against them, may come to know that there are people and a God out there that cares.

Let us be bold. Let us renew our determination to grow in friendship with God and also to make new friends with whom we can share a life of faith and with whom we can work to bring healing to this aching, broken world which is crying on our doorsteps. If we can do this, then let us rejoice, for the Kingdom of God will indeed be at hand.

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

**Music for Reflection** – What a Beautiful Name/ Agnus Dei (Live)

Travis Cottrell ft. Lily Cottrell

### **Prayer for Ourselves and Others**

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Name above all names, name yet untamed; in the fullness of time you emptied yourself becoming weak in power to be strong in love.

Still fear and trembling fill our days and our faith; please help us to shift from fear to awe.

Move us from trembling to transformation that we might not confuse the love of infinite power for the power of infinite love.

So, we pray for those in places of privilege and power that empty words and empty promises might be replaced with the fullness of justice and the honesty of humility.

We pray for those under the thumb of privilege and power: for voices silenced, breath suppressed, lives destroyed.

Bend our knees that we might uplift all those long-held down, all those long ignored, all those bound by powers and principalities into shapes that seek to hide your imaging shining within them.

Encourage us to be of that same mind of that same spirit of that unity in Christ that first wound the world with the cords of your grace. Amen.

#### **Hymn CH4 457 – All hail the power of Jesus' name**

##### **Benediction**

You are one of God's beloved. As we step out of our time together and into the world we live in may our words and actions be testimony to God who loves us beyond measure, we who are treasured by God, inspired by Jesus, and led by the Holy Spirit each and every day of our lives. So, may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Spirit be upon you and all whom you love, this day and forevermore. Amen.