

Jesus' authority

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

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

Before I went to seminary, I used to meet regularly with a couple of friends to sing and play guitar. We never actually played any concerts, but for about six months we would meet on a Tuesday evening and jam together: guitar, bass and drums. We could have got good enough to play in public but for the fact that the band came together around the same time as I had been accepted to train as a priest in another part of the country. Sadly, I said goodbye to dreams of rock stardom and entered the strange world of the seminary.

In the short period when we played together, I remember having to come up with songs to sing and play, and one of them was a Bob Dylan song, called "Gotta Serve Somebody." It was released during Bob's Christian phase, when he wrote a large number of very good quality Christian songs. "Gotta Serve Somebody" is about the stark choice between serving God or the devil. In the song, he lists various occupations, and at the end of each verse returns to the refrain, "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody."

Whom do you serve? Dylan's song challenges the notion that we are free from being beholden to God or the devil. I say, my life belongs to me, and not to anyone else - if I serve someone it is because I have made that choice. If I choose to serve no-one then that is also my choice. In the song, Dylan addresses various occupations, such as ambassadors, boxers, gamblers, dancers, rock 'n' rollers, business men, high level thieves, doctors, chiefs, state troopers, young Turks, the head of a TV network, construction workers, landlords, bank owners - the list goes on. He's making the point that whoever you are and whatever you do, you are not really your own master. Dylan gives us a choice of two: the devil or the Lord. Which one is it to be?

I'm not sure everyone will agree with Dylan. I mean, aren't there are more gray areas in life, resulting in more choices than simply between God and the devil? But what if Dylan were right? Allowing for gray areas gives us a bit of wriggle room to justify our poor choices. So we can say, "I choose to do this thing out of the freedom of my own will, but is it actually myself acting or something malevolent acting within me?" "Or if I do something good, is it myself doing good or something good acting within me? Am I truly free?" This is a question we must ask ourselves. If God gives us freedom to make our own choices, then this is a freedom we must learn to exercise responsibly. At the end of the day, it won't be enough to say, "I did it from the best of intentions." My father once told me that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

What can our gospel today tell us about all of this? Jesus begins his ministry in sensational fashion, astounding people with his teaching and carrying out an exorcism. He does this in the local synagogue, the place where the faithful gather for prayer, readings and instruction in the Law and Prophets. Anyone who was well schooled in the Scriptures could be invited to comment on the readings. Jesus steps forward and the effect of his teaching astounds his listeners. We hear that he taught as one having authority, ("not as the scribes", which is a

swipe at the learned members of the synagogue). Jesus is different in some way and the reason has to do with the fact that Jesus teaches with “authority”.

Here’s a question for you, then. When you hear Jesus speak, do you recognize his authority? Not everyone does - not even Christians. Whatever you might think of Jesus, this is a question that sooner or later you will have to answer. It’s a fact that all of us live our lives under some kind of authority. As children, we lived under the authority of our parents or guardians. At school, we lived under the authority of our teachers. Later, we lived under the authority of our bosses. For the most part, these are benign examples of authority which enable us to grow into mature adulthood. Without them we would be hopelessly lost.

I don’t know about you, but I have a slight anti-authoritarian streak in me. I don’t like being told what to do, especially by someone who isn’t as smart as me. I especially rebel when someone begins by saying, “this is for your own good.” If I am to submit to a higher authority, it can be done either by coercion or by trust. If it’s done by coercion, that breeds resentment and can lead to a withering of the human soul. Naturally, the best authority is the one I can trust. The best authority I know is Jesus Christ. Now I am thinking, “how long did it take for me to trust Jesus?” What kind of authority does Jesus have?

Jesus’ authority comes from his divine nature. That means that when Jesus speaks we hear the truth being spoken. Truth in itself has authority, which is why the enemies of truth are jealous of it and twist their lies so that they sound like truth. That’s why it is important to accept Jesus’ authority as a central part of your belief, because to do so will make it easier for you to reach the goal of salvation, and save you from being led down the garden path by those forces which do not have your best interests at heart.

It is interesting that one of the first people to recognize Jesus’ authority was not a scribe but an unclean spirit, who had taken up residence inside a man. Imagine the scene in the synagogue when the voice of this devil cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” How ironic that it is the devil who is first to recognize Jesus’ true identity. But then, it makes sense, because the unclean spirit has been used to getting its own way, and harming others, and now comes the one who will force the evil spirit out. Jesus says, “Be silent, and come out of him!” Then, we see the power of Jesus - the full authority of Jesus - over the demonic spirits of the world, as the spirit comes out of the man.

This is, as I said, a sensational way to begin a ministry. Unless you have had experience with demonic powers, it may strike you as a little far-fetched. All I can say is that, if evil exists, then it exists in the world we see and in the world we don’t see. I take the view that when you stray from the things of God, and are tempted by the power of evil, you can easily become subject to the power of the devil. That’s what the song was warning us about, because the devil can take power over us, if we are not careful.

The devil may not come to us beating a loud drum, but in a softly spoken voice that imitates the voice of truth. He will find your weak spots, such as your anger, resentment, and jealousy, and use them against you. It could happen without you even being aware of it. The best way to avoid it is to listen to your conscience. But even your conscience is vulnerable. What is your last line of defense?

It is to trust in the Lord. It is to trust in the authority of Jesus. Jesus' authority is the power to protect and the power to save. In our lives we recognize this power as a blessing from God. In our prayers we evoke the authority of Christ, by saying, "in Jesus' name. Amen." When we baptize a new believer, we invoke the authority of Christ to cleanse them from their sins and then we welcome them into the new family of faith. When we bless a home, we sprinkle holy water in it to make it holy, to invoke Christ's presence and drive out the forces of darkness. On a normal Ash Wednesday, you would receive a mark of the cross of Christ on your forehead, written in ashes, to remind you both of your own mortality and of the authority of Jesus over death. And whenever we make the sign of the cross over ourselves, we are drawing the symbol of our faith across our bodies, as a sign of witness to the authority of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Accepting the authority of Christ may take time. We have been taught that the greatest authority is ourselves, and that is a hard lesson to unlearn. And there are other reasons why it may take time. We may have had a nasty experience in the past with a human authority, when that authority was exercised with coercion, or with deception. With Jesus, God has provided us with another model of authority - one driven by love. We accept Jesus into our lives, have our sins forgiven and learn to follow him - at the same time, we accept his authority over every aspect of our lives.

All of this has a reason and a purpose: it is for our growth as mature Christians and for our life here and in the life to come. Of course, it is still possible to spend your whole life in rebellion against authority, and trust only in your own judgment. Sooner or later, however, the time will come when you will have to make a decision. In the world there are teachers like Jesus whose authority we can trust, and our own progress will depend on trusting them. And there are those who will try to deceive us, and lead us astray, making us think we are the ones in charge, before realizing that we have made a mistake and are serving the wrong master.

The people in the synagogue had a taste of the power for change which Jesus was bringing into their lives. They exclaimed, "What is this? A new teaching - with authority!" Look deep within yourself today, and ask yourself, if you want Jesus to be the power in your life. Your life depends on making the right choice. "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody."

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

Father David Beresford