**1st October 2023
Philippians 2.1-13
Matthew 21.23-32

 The ‘Authority’ of Love**

*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen*.

 ‘By what authority are you acting like this? Who gave you this authority’!

That’s the question Jesus was asked in today’s reading from Matthew as he taught in Jerusalem’s Temple. He was asked it by those who thought they did have authority and my word didn’t they have grand sounding titles: The Chief Priests and the Elders of the Nation.

Imagine the scene. This upstart from Nazareth begins to gather a crowd, he’s a good preacher who can hold his own and what’s more people seem interested in what he has to say. Someone knocks on the door of Temple Security and Jesus is rumbled! Preaching by the roadside was one thing but holding forth in the Temple was quite another. It’s a bit like nipping into the pulpit of Westminster Abbey when no one is looking and having your five minutes of fame before being marched out of the building by a verger with muscles!

So it’s an important question and we ask it today in many contexts – By what authority are you acting like this?

It’s a question about leadership and integrity.

Jesus turns the tables on his inquisitors and asks a question back. He wants to know if they recognised the Baptism of Repentance as preached and practiced by John. It’s a fine question because he was quizzing these religious leaders not just about theory but practice. John advocated that his hearers needed more than ritual, they needed a change of heart. John inspired his followers to live differently.

The Temple authorities fudged their answer, so Jesus tells a short parable. One son said to his farmer father that he would go and work in the vineyard, but this was a hollow, false intention. He stayed indoors and played on his computer! The other son at first refused his father’s request but then thought better of it and went out to tend the grapes. He had a change of heart and lived differently.

All of this was code. It’s as if Jesus says, the prostitutes and tax-collectors, in other words, the marginalised in his society, they give me authority because they believe my message that a changed, refocused life is possible. But you institutional, religious types give me no credence, you don’t listen and you certainly don’t change.

The way we live says so much about our belief and it’s a mark of our integrity.

Amongst a significant number of folk from the younger generation there is a deep respect for the ideas of Buddhism and one of the central ideas of that ‘faith’ is that talking about religion, when it’s an end in itself is pointless, creeds are not the main focus but ethics, the way we live, the people we are becoming, the lifestyle we value.

I sometimes think of this as the difference between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis, which I’m not even sure is a real word!

Orthodoxy is all about right belief. Orthopraxis is about right living. And if we were in a Life and Faith Group it would be a good discussion starter to examine which one we value most.

Well, for what it’s worth I think Jesus is saying here that the religious professionals valued the orthodoxy whilst he and John was very much in the business of orthopraxis.

I suspect that Jesus was more radical than many of us give him credit for. For us he’s almost respectable but that’s not the way the High Priests viewed him. He turns so much teaching upside down and whilst never wanting to do away with rules and ethical frameworks he was adamant the reason why we do something is as important as what we do.

As a modern hymn puts it: Love is his way.

Take, for example how that might work itself out, say in the context of family life.

After all, what sort of authority do parents have? Well – ‘none’ might be the obvious answer. But that isn’t true.

The only authority or respect that’s worth anything is that of love.

We’ll set the guidelines and enforce them! And our children will grow, develop and go their own way – and that’s the way it should be.

Yet the lasting imprint we’ll make on their lives is the love we offer them. The example of love we show them. The security of love we give them.

Philippians 2, our first reading this morning, contains one of the most beautiful hymns of the early Church all about the humility and servant character of Jesus. Appropriately either side of this 1st century song are verses about the sort of love that we might aspire to in our community life together.

Paul writes of a common sense of love filling church life as we look to each other’s interests not merely to our own.

Where was the authority of Jesus? Not, I think, in the robes he wore or the title he bore but in the fact that after a long and tiring day he made time to receive mothers and bless their children. As he came upon a village he didn’t skirt round the quarantined area set aside for those with skin diseases but walked through it, touching those who suffered and showing them unaccustomed respect.

Sounds like an oxymoron but it was the Authority of Love.

It’s what will have been happening in places like Morocco and Libya since the tragedies both countries faced at the end of the summer. So many people will have stepped up to the mark and tried to help out, standing alongside the bereaved, looking after the homeless, supporting the injured.

Our faith cannot explain away tragedy, instead it gives us the imperative, based on the example of Jesus, to stand alongside people amid tragedy.

Because that’s what love does – and that’s what faith looks like. Paul puts it this way: *Look to other’s interests and not merely to your own.*

And it’s tough. Love is never the easiest way – that’s indifference. Love is about sticking with a painful situation, making yourself vulnerable when your help is refused, keeping the door open instead of walking away.

It’s the way God loves us and it’s the sort of love Jesus showed us.

Next month we are looking forward to a Come and Sing Day here at AFC with Hilary, and Hilary took over as the Military Wives Choir director from Gareth Malone.

And I remember a story Gareth Malone told as he was interviewed on Desert Island Discs, one all about self-giving love.

He spoke so fondly of his family – rather like the Von Trapps, his family also played music together.

He was particularly inspired by his Grandma and so wanted to sing at her funeral. Yet come the moment in the service he opened his mouth, and nothing came out. This man who had taught thousands to sing just croaked.

To his great surprise, both his father and old music teacher spontaneously joined in to help him out.

Eventually they stood down as he regained his composure and sang one last time for his Granny.

As he told that story, I could hear his voice crack. It had been for him a moment surrounded by the deepest love imaginable. The love of his family. Memories of love filled with moments of struggle and faithfulness.

This offering of a song at his Grandmother’s funeral was actually rather like a sacrament – for it contained such deep, spiritual meaning.

How does the hymn go, *Love is his way* – God’s way, yet it can also be our way.

The love that never gives up – the sort that Jesus showed – the kind of love Paul was talking about as he talks of looking to each other’s interests.

Because perhaps in the end it’s our Orthopraxis rather than our Orthodoxy that says the most about us.

May such love flourish and be a blessing in all our lives, in our church and in our community. And may our inspiration for such a way of life come from God, whose name is love. Amen.
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 29th September 2023*