

## BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Jesus may not have led a mass movement, but he attracted much popular interest and could not be ignored. However, his popularity meant that the Jewish religious authorities had to be cautious in the way they dealt with him. The cleansing of the temple was a direct challenge and a response was required; his popularity meant that that they could not arrest him, so a delegation from the Sanhedrin (who were responsible for the temple police) was sent to question him. The issue is authority, as it generally is for those in charge: 'By what authority are you acting like this? Who gave you authority to act in this way?' The question was hardly a polite enquiry, and was designed to make the point that, in fact, Jesus had no authority. He replies with a standard rabbinical response, a counter-question designed to settle the issue: 'The baptism of John: was it from God, or from men?'

The question goes to the heart of the matter, but avoids focussing on Jesus himself. The authorities accepted John as a prophet, and of course his authority did not come from them; Jesus is inviting them to admit that in John they recognised that God was at work. It would follow, of course, that God was also at work in Jesus as his works were greater than John's. In refusing to answer they admit that they cannot recognise God's action; that destroys their claim to authority and, therefore, their right to interrogate Jesus. He declines to state his authority, and this response is consistent with his parables and miracles; in effect he

says, 'If you cannot see it, then nothing will be achieved by telling you.' The truth has to come from the heart.

Jesus then drives the point home with the parable of the two sons: it is not what you say that counts in the sight of God (nor, indeed, in the sight of men), but what you do. The leaders of Israel would have been scandalised and insulted to be told that prostitutes and tax collectors, who repented at the teaching of John, offered a better example of faith than themselves. But they did. It is those who truly know their need of God, like the sinful and the despised, who turn to him in their hearts. The leaders ought to have known this; the prophets, like Ezekiel, had made the same point. God looks to the heart, not to position and status, and 'when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life.' (*Ezekiel 18.27*) I imagine they did know this, but maybe it was just head-knowledge that hadn't touched their hearts, or maybe it was just too costly for them – too much would have been forfeited, both publicly and personally – to have heeded it.

In contrast to such attitudes St Paul presents the model of Jesus who had no regard for status or position or power. Although equal to God, he did not regard 'equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.' (*Philippians 2.6–8*) Jesus was the son who both said and did the right thing, his actions and words were at one. He is the divinely appointed model – for faith, for discipleship, and for leadership. He is the one, says St Paul, whom we should set

before us as we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (*Philippians 2.12*).

Perhaps we ought to spare a thought for the leaders of Israel. Leadership is a fraught enterprise; on the one hand the leaders carry the expectations of the people, and on the other hand they are constrained by what is possible, and an element in that constraint is a popular dislike of radical change. The people want it both ways, and popular demands will often be for a short-term remedy and may sit light to the requirements of law and morality. Leadership requires wisdom and moral strength, but these are not the qualities that always go hand-in-hand with powerful personalities and popular acclaim. And power once gained is hard to relinquish, as we see with so many autocratic leaders in the world; the powerful tend to enlarge the matters and the resources they control.

As one of the early American Presidents, James Madison, observed, power is of an encroaching nature, or in Lord Acton's famous aphorism: 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'<sup>\*</sup> Corrupt religious leadership is doubly pernicious because it sets itself to serve a higher interest. Christian leadership has a threefold character, it is pastoral, priestly and prophetic, and within the prophetic rôle is the duty of equipping people to recognise the hand of God in the world. This, according to Jesus, is what the leaders of Israel had consistently failed to do.

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<sup>\*</sup> Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton: Louise Creighton (ed), *The Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton*.