

Matthew 21:23-27

Our Gospel reading today perhaps causes us to raise an eyebrow. Is Jesus just dodging the question here? Why wouldn't he answer the question, and if not for the chief priests (who were trying to trap him in his words), but at least for the people?

A few things to consider:

First: He has already answered this question, not only for the chief leaders but also the crowds. Repeatedly he has spoken of "His Father in Heaven," whose will he is doing. He has already pushed back against the accusation that he is doing these things by the power of demons – "I am casting out demons! A house divided will not stand." It is clear this One, Jesus, is of God. This question has been answered, the chief leaders refuse to accept it and are stubbornly digging their heels in demanding over and over that Jesus say something different, but he won't because what he has told them already is true.

Second: As we get closer to the Cross, which is certainly the case during this exchange (this is after Palm Sunday) Jesus does seem to be less interested in playing silly games. If someone is not interested in truth, but just "winning the argument"—none of us are ever like that are we? On facebook or whatever? If someone is not interested in truth but just winning the argument, Jesus isn't particularly interested in their games. He is not a side-show act and has more important things to do—namely, setting his face to the Cross. So he gives the chief leaders a riddle showing everyone they are not interested in truth, but only winning the argument—an argument they will lose, by the way.

Because Thirdly: Jesus does actually give us truth in this exchange with the Chief priests. It may not be the most direct answer to their question, but he does give them and the people something.

However, we don't see it in the verses on the back of the bulletin. In these verses we read today the pharisees raise question about authority. Jesus says, "You want to talk about authority? Well let's consider John's Authority." And so we read that they refuse to submit to John's authority or believe his message. But hear the end of the exchange (after a short parable about disobedient sons—cough cough the chief leaders) after this short parable we hear in verse 32: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."

He answers his own question to them about John, "Was his baptism of heaven?" Jesus says his ministry was *righteous*. That's a "yes," John and his baptism and work was of heaven and therefore OF and with the authority of God. And they, the chief leaders rejected it. They rejected the godly, of God, message of the forebearer of the Messiah of God, and now, surprise-surprise, they reject the Messiah OF God and with the authority of God who has now come and is standing in front of them.

John preached repentance and law, Jesus is God's response: A Savior. If you reject the first, "I haven't done anything wrong, I won't submit to those funny old, outdated teachings about good and evil" you, just like the chief priests, will likely reject the second, because, if you aren't a very big sinner, you don't need a very big Savior do you?

"Yeah, I'm not perfect, no one is, but I'm a pretty good person, does God have a few bandaids for me? I can handle the rest."

Versus:

“Woe is me, I am a sinner full of the poison of vipers! And I don’t need just a few band-aids, I need a heart transplant and a transfusion to stop the hemorrhaging and the disease in me.”

May God grant us to see truth and not just concern ourselves with who is winning. And the truth is out there. We know there is right and wrong, not based on an individual or a society or a survival mechanism—and we know this because individuals can be wrong, societies can be wrong, and pure survival mechanisms—eugenics, killing those with imperfect genes—that’s wrong! And so there is right and wrong, and that’s true! And where has such a real thing come from? Molecules randomly bouncing in our heads? Glands that produce particular emotions that somehow arbitrate truth or give some advantage in a petri dish of life? Or is there real right and wrong? Yes! And how if not from a Just Judge who has written it on our hearts?

And when this very real right and wrong comes to us and convicts us. May God grant us to fight against the pride we have, like the chief priests, to self-justify, to project onto others who we think we are better than, or to ignore it, question it, “what authority says this?” But rather to see this is from God, it is expressed in God’s word, and therefore humble ourselves before it. Lest those “worse sinners, who we are better than” go into the kingdom ahead of us.

No, we, as much as we think we are better than, are still so far short of the Glory of God. We are the ones who cannot conquer death and have no mechanism of our own of coming to God. This is the teaching of John, that is from heaven and of God.

And then may we see Christ. John points to him and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” This One, the Messiah of God, IS God come to us, in history, as evidenced in the scriptures and history. And because of His Work and Word we rejoice that God comes to us even now, as promised, in word, water, bread and wine.

This One, Jesus, is that Lamb whose blood is shed as payment for our sin, whose blood is shed to wash you clean of every spot and stain, on account of this One and His Work and His Empty tomb we rejoice in the Word that proclaims us forgiven, hearts washed clean, blood transfused (his for yours), this Word proclaims that on His account we are also victorious over death—heirs of eternal life

And we doubt: “But how can this be? What word has the authority to say these things to you who are so sinful?” That’s what our reading is about is it not, authority? What do we learn today? That John, who preaches the law to show your sin, this is OF God—it is true! But do we also not learn that Jesus carries the same authority of God? He does. And it is given to the Son of Man, Jesus, to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6). And if that is OF God, with the Authority of the Just Judge? Well then, who can dispute it? You who struggle to forgive yourself? Sorry, you aren’t that strong you don’t have the authority to overrule Jesus’ word of forgiveness for you. Sorry, might as well give that up. Nor can the evil one over rule this verdict, nor the people who hate you. No, Jesus gets the final word. And he stretched his hands out on the cross and has said “It is finished.” Payment made, for you.

Rejoice in the authority of John... that’s hard when he’s condemning you. But it’s true. Then turn to the Lamb of God and rejoice in his Authority to pay your price and pronounce you forgiven. It is true. There is no higher authority for he is One with the Father.

The Chief Priests challenged Jesus’ authority and failed. But make no mistake they still receive truth. May we receive it and rejoice in it. Amen.