

ALL AUTHORITY

(Matthew 28.16-20)

Introduction

Small children, usually when they are about 4 or 5 years old, go through a phase when they continually ask the question "why?" We know deep down it's necessary - how else are they going to learn if they never ask questions? And we have to admit that were probably no different when we were young.

But if you've been a parent of a child this age, you'll know very well how wearisome it can be.

Children are naturally curious and eager to learn. But there are times when the question "why?" has nothing to do with inquisitiveness and everything to do with defiance.

Share your toys please, Anna. Why?

You'll have no ice cream until you eat your peas, Nathan. Why?

You draw on paper, not on the walls, Joseph. Why?

It's time for bed now, Benjamin. Why?

And - we've all said it - sometimes the only answer we have the energy to give is "because I say so" or "just because."

It's fifty years ago this month that students in Paris began a protest demonstration that brought the French economy to a standstill and, at times, turned really ugly.

Such was the explosive and anarchic nature of this uprising that the French government temporarily ceased to function. President de Gaulle, fearing civil war or another all-out revolution, actually fled the country at one point.

Just as a young child's petulance defies a parent's authority, the riots of May 1968 targeted all authority, all power, and all institutions; the government, the military, the police, the education system, the church, the family, the media – everything.

And though it was mostly confined to France, the spirit of *mai soixante-huit* has permeated the entire western world, including here.

Who gave you the right? What makes you so special? Why should I do this or that just because you say so? These attitudes have become embedded in our society.

Consider attitudes towards the royal family, towards elected office. Consider the disrespect footballers and tennis stars have for match officials. Consider the physical attacks on firefighters and first responders. Consider the fragmentation of marriage and family life.

So it's with fear and trepidation I, as a member of the clergy, still seen by some as part of the establishment, address you tonight on this subject of authority. In fact, "*all* authority in heaven and on earth."

Jesus' Authority

It's a phrase, as we've just heard, that Jesus used in Matthew 28, just before his ascension. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" he said.

Throughout his ministry on earth he was questioned and challenged on his authority by the religious elite. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they sniffed.

Everything he did was challenged and contested.

"Who said you can heal on the sabbath? It's not allowed."

"Why does this fellow forgive sins? Only God can do that."

Who does this upstart think he is? Isn't this just the carpenter's son?

It was non-stop. When he produced a miraculous catch they probably moaned all day about him fishing without a licence.

So much for the religious leaders. But for the ordinary people, it was totally different. Have you noticed?

In Mark 1.22 and 27 it says people were amazed by Jesus' teaching because it had *authority* unlike the teachers of the law. His message was powerful. It was striking. It was thrilling. People marveled.

Even the Roman centurion saw Jesus' authority. He said to Jesus, "This is my line of work. I say 'jump' and my men all say 'how high?' I get how authority works. You've got it in spades. You just need to say a word and – that'll be enough, it'll be done - my servant will be healed."

The American theologian Bernard Ramm summed up Jesus' words saying that they "are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken ... Their greatness lies in ...dealing clearly, definitively and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast. No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer those fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them."

In other words, what Jesus said was not theoretical, propositional or merely academic. When he spoke, he turned heads. He opened his mouth and people hung on every word. It was electric. It was revolutionary because he

addressed felt needs like no one else did but also because what he said was backed up by works of power.

There's a little story about a vicar shaking hands with his congregation on the way out of church: Someone says, "Thank you for that sermon vicar; I've never understood that subject and I still don't understand it – but now I don't understand it on a much higher level!"

We can smile at a funny story but there's enough truth in it to bite.

About six months ago, a man I know who is training for ordained ministry posted the following words on his Facebook page. I'm going to read it slowly...

"Just had a lecture on missiology which included a very broad and incisive view of church and mission... The orientation themes were placed in a new context. We looked at... a view of critical correlation and the questions we need to bring to Scripture and the view we have of the world. Then we spent time with a social cognitive discourse analysis on the wonder of the hybrid person. We even looked at epigenetics and how the church can suppress who we truly are, yet in embracing our DNA, we can be freed to bring that part of our humanity to the light."

I mean - *what?* Who understood any of that? Can anyone help me here? This makes me so angry! Why are we training people to empty our churches?

There is zero authority and zero amazement, in stuff like that; it's just pretentious, pompous garbage. People listen to hot air like that and just yawn.

That's not authority at all. It's spiritual impotence, ineptness and irrelevance.

Jesus' Authority and Ours

When I talk about authority, what I mean is this: there's a church in Halifax that started six years ago primarily for homeless, marginalised, recovering addicts, ex-offenders and street kids.

I was chatting to one of the leaders of that church last month and she told me about a service a few years ago, when a Wiccan High Priestess visited. While standing at the back during the singing of Amazing Grace, she encountered the living God, and couldn't physically move while waves of love and grace washed over her. She quickly renounced her life as a High Priestess and surrendered her life to Jesus. She's now a key staff member there.

Another day during sung worship, phones were ringing, a group started chatting and it looked like a fight was about to break out. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, they stopped everything mid-song and explained that they needed to pray against a spirit of distraction.

Once that happened, a powerful time of worship followed. The Holy Spirit came in power. At the end of the service, they discovered a visitor had given his life to Jesus and another man was healed of lung cancer which was later verified by doctors.

That's authority. That's unmistakably the mark of Jesus. This is what he does. This is what he is like.

He preached the gospel, healed the sick, cast out demons and raised the dead.

Then, the Gospels tell us, he sent out the 12 and said, "Now you do it, go on! You preach the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead - do it in my authority, in my name - off you go." And they came back and said, "This is amazing. It actually works with us as well."

Of course it works. Because it flows from Jesus' authority. So then he sent out the 72 and said, "Now it's your turn; preach the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead - do it in my authority - off you go." They came back and said, "This is brilliant. It works with us as well."

And this is exactly what it means when Jesus tells us to pray, "Your kingdom come." It means the awesome power of heaven brought into the everyday ups and downs of life so that lives are touched, communities are healed, and nations are transformed.

Jesus said "As the Father sent me, so I send you."

You and I have been given authority in prayer to make a difference. Prayer is the difference between the best we can do and the best God can do. "Anything you ask, in my name," says Jesus, "will be given to you so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

That's what this ten days of prayer "Thy kingdom come" is about; that people far away from God will be brought near.

Ending

So on this Ascension Day, let me end with some words from the Apostle Paul in our second reading that can encourage us as we pray with the authority of Christ that his kingdom will come and what he wants will be done here on earth as is the case all the time in heaven.

Ephesians 2.6-7 says this: "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that... he might show the incomparable riches of his grace..."