

April 7

Matthew 21: 23-27

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' ²⁴Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?"' ²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

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Oh my – who doesn't want a conversation about authority right now...

The turf war in the temple continues with this morning's reading. The leadership demands to know how Jesus dares to do what he does – and their belligerence puts them in an impossible position. Jesus matches them question for question and suddenly they realize they are engaged in a battle of wits, and they are unarmed.

We are witnessing a similar struggle for (and with) authority during this global pandemic. Whose information is trusted? Whose projections are valid? Whose precautions will get us through to the other side the fastest? And what role do communities of faith play in all this?

The parallel conversations to the gospel lesson are vivid; as religious leaders, if we follow government guidelines, are we ignoring divine authority? As members of a 'free society' should we be able to seek alternatives or offer contrary opinions? If we acknowledge the fear that this virus has generated, have we given this microscopic entity control over all human endeavor?

To answer one way is to sound defeatist – to respond with skepticism suggests carelessness. We are afraid of losing autonomy and we are afraid of the lethal potential of our free-thinking...the question of authority is a persistent one, and there are places on the planet right now where it is difficult to tell who (or what) is in charge.

Governments are just people – and people respond to crisis in a variety of ways; some are courageous and compassionate; some are indifferent and reckless; most fall somewhere in between. And there are people of faith involved in all of these decision making bodies; people who know that it is possible to walk the line between knowing and not knowing – between confidence and calamity – with gentle deliberation and the assurance that we have been here before.

Jesus does not arrive asking for permission. He is not seeking a majority share of the popular vote. He won't need to pass a law, or a budget, or survive a non-confidence motion. He comes announcing the 'kingdom of God is at hand'. He offers compassion and wholeness; he welcomes the outcast and pardons the 'sinner'. And because this baffles those who crave authority, the weight of the authoritative system will soon try to overwhelm the good in Jesus by arresting him and crucifying him.

By Friday of this week, those authorities will think that they've shown you who is in control.

On Sunday morning, the truth will be revealed.

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Let us pray:

Eternal God speak your peace – right now -
into the chaos of this crisis.

It is difficult for us – at the best of times – to submit ourselves to authority.

The information is confusing and sometimes contradictory.

The statistics are terrifying – the level of grief and suffering is hard to imagine.

Speak peace to us, and help us to admit to your authority.

Your presence is not diminished; your power to confound our senses is undeniable.

Show us your Easter love in this seemingly endless Good Friday moment.

Amen.

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Be assured of the Peace that God has promised,

which is yours now and always through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen