

SERMON NOTES

Fourth Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Synaxis Gospel
Mark 11: 27-33

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

INTRODUCTION

Harvard, established in the seventeenth century, was the first College in the United States. Its sole purpose was to educate men for the ministry of the Church. Harvard is now a great university and although it still has a Divinity School, today, the original founders would not recognize their school or its curriculum. Outwardly it is still Harvard and it is still an institution of higher learning, but the liberal goals regarding the type of minister it prepares today are far different from the strict Puritanism of the past. Whether this development has been good or bad is a matter of opinion, but the point is that those, who have had authority over the school over the years, have led the school far away from the original founders' objectives.

In ancient Israel, over the years, a similar development away from the Founder's intention occurred. God had established a religion that was intended to guide and enable His people to properly worship Him. Obedience to the rules He instituted was meant to reflect the community's deep and unwavering love, trust, and thankfulness for the One Who is their Creator, God, and Savior. In doing this, they were to be a model for all the other nations of the world. But 1400 years later, things had drastically changed.

The religious authorities of Jesus' day ruled over the Temple of God that was outwardly gorgeous. It was a wonder of beauty to the known world of the time. But the original intention of God had been lost. It had become the center of a lucrative business for the priests, whose hearts did not belong to their God, but to their belly and pride. Even the courtyard that had been designated as a place for the other nations to come and join in worship to Almighty God had been turned into an open market filled with animals and money changers. God's purpose was to draw all nations to Himself. This purpose was being trampled by greed and disregard for the needs of the Gentiles. The worship of the Jewish people was thereby rendered contemptible in the eyes of God.

During the last week of Jesus' life on earth, He returned to Jerusalem. As the excited pilgrims waved palm branches and cried out "Hosanna to the Son of David,"¹ Jesus entered the city riding on a donkey, signifying the return of the King.² The next day at the Temple, to the astonishment of the people, Jesus drove out all who did business in the

¹ Matthew 21:9

² Matthew 21: 4-5

Court of the Gentiles along with their wares. He then left Jerusalem, returning to the home of His friends in nearby Bethany. Our reading gives the account of the following day.

SYNTAXIS READING

Mark 11: 27-33

And they came again to Jerusalem.

And as He was walking in the Temple, the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?"

And Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 'Was the baptism of John from Heaven, or from men?' Answer Me."

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From Heaven,' He will say, 'Then why did you not believe him?'"

"But shall we say, 'From men'?" – they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet indeed.

And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know."

And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

NOTES

And they came again to Jerusalem.

If Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, accompanied by the waving of palms, occurred on the day we now refer to as Palm Sunday, then the time of the entry mentioned in our reading would be Tuesday of Holy Week. Since Jesus arrived in the area, He and His disciples had been living in the home of His friends in the village of nearby Bethany. It is from this village that they are returning to Jerusalem.

And as He was walking in the Temple, the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and began saying to Him,

On this His last visit to Jerusalem, all of Jesus' teaching was done in the Temple precinct. The day before, Jesus, angry at the sacrilege of sellers turning the Temple court into a market place, had driven the merchants out and overturned the moneychangers' tables. Of course, those who were in charge of the Temple, and under whose authority the market had been operating, were upset. So upon Jesus' return to the Temple, they came to confront Him about His action.

The chief priests: These were the High Priest and former High Priests. The position changed hands fairly often in New Testament days, but the 'chief priests' usually had family connections with each other.

The scribes: These were those entrusted with preserving the law; they were influential teachers of the law. Some sat as judges in the Sanhedrin (the highest tribunal of the Jews and presided over by the High Priest).

The Elders (of the people): These were heads of prominent families and were members of the Sanhedrin.

“By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?”

In other words, “Do you claim to have some personal authority (such as that of a prophet or the Messiah), or did someone with authority (such as some person with responsibility for the Temple) commission you to take that action?”

And Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

Conditioning an answer to a question by asking a question was a common practice.

‘Was the baptism of John from Heaven, or from men?’ Answer Me.”

Jesus is referring to John the Baptist, who had been beheaded by order of the king, Herod Antipas. John had been preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven they had all been waiting for was at hand. He had been, therefore, calling the people to prepare their selves for citizenship in the Kingdom by repenting of their sins. All those who did so were then baptized by John in the Jordan River. The chief priests, scribes and elders must now tell Jesus who commissioned John: God? Or was John acting on his own or by some other mere human authority?

This is a perfect example of how masterfully Jesus handled every confrontation He had with the religious rulers. Time and again, they tried to maneuver Him into saying something for which they could arrest Him, or at least make Him lose face with the people. But on the contrary, in those encounters it was always the religious leaders who left humiliated.

Here, the religious leaders know that none of *them* gave Jesus authority to drive out the merchants. So they think that Jesus must admit that He acted without authority, for which they could arrest Him. Or, He must claim that God told Him to do it. In that case they probably planned to arrest Him for blasphemy. If He answered that He acted on His own authority as the Messiah (Christ), they could turn Him over to the Romans for treason. ‘Christ’ was another way of saying *King of the Jews* and the Romans broached no kings not appointed by and subject to Rome. The religious leaders thought they had Jesus trapped at last.

If that was their plan, Jesus turned the tables on them. As we shall see below, the question Jesus posed to the religious leaders put them in the situation of either affirming Jesus’ authority themselves, or else giving an answer that would enflame the listening crowd against them.

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From Heaven,’

John the Baptist, who had proclaimed that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, had also identified Jesus as its King. If Jesus were the Divine King as John said, Jesus had every right to act as He had done. It was *His* Temple. So if they answered that John’s baptism was from Heaven,

they were forced into admitting they were being disobedient to God by not recognizing and accepting the One John had proclaimed.

He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’

And what could they answer to *that* question? It is a foolish contradiction to say you do *not* believe someone who you say has been sent by God.

But shall we say, ‘From men’?’

This is what they really wanted to answer. Moreover, if they said this, their unbelief in John’s assertion about Jesus would not be seen as a contradiction. If John had been simply another crackpot in the desert, they did not *have* to believe what he had said about them or about Jesus.

John the Baptist had been no friend of theirs. John had rightly recognized their hypocrisy; pretending to be godly servants of the LORD, they paraded around in their priestly robes, demanding the respect of the people, while all the time they were the blind leading the blind. John’s stinging accusation still rang in their ears: “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance!”³

But fear of the listening crowds prevented them from giving the answer they wanted to give.

—they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet indeed.

The multitude was listening for the answer the religious leaders would give. They all believed that John was a holy prophet sent from God. When Herod Antipas was defeated in a major battle with a neighboring country, all the people felt it was God’s judgment on Herod for executing John.⁴ The religious leaders did not dare say a word against John.

And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.”

So, trapped, the leaders equivocate. They plead ignorance. This is extremely humiliating for them. Those who have exalted themselves as knowing and deciding all the fine points of their religion will be seen by the people as teachers who can’t even make a decision about the authenticity of an *obvious* prophet of God.

And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

According to the rules, Jesus could refuse to answer them and He did so. But in posing His question in the first place, Jesus gave them their answer. His authority, like that of John the Baptist’s was from God Himself. John testified that Jesus was the promised divine King. If they answered that John’s authority was from God, then they had to accept John’s testimony about Who Jesus is. This was all very clear to the religious leaders who were, even at that moment, planning to murder Jesus.

APPLICATION

Suppose Jesus asked *us* a slightly different question from the one He asked the religious leaders. “Is My authority of men or of God?” We have the same three possible answers.

³ Matthew 3:7-8

⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.109ff

- 1) Jesus' authority is of men.
- 2) Jesus' authority is of God.
- 3) We do not know.

What would be our reply? If we are *only* 'cultural Armenians' giving proper honor to our history and traditions, cherishing our ethnic identity, we *might* answer, "From men." This reply suggests two opinions. The first is that Jesus was a product of religious fiction, a creation of the Church. The second is that Jesus was at most only a good man. The second idea suggests that He probably meant well, but his ideas ran afoul of the rulers of the time who subsequently had Him crucified.

This answer rejects the Bible and thus relieves us of any obligation to find God's will and purpose for our Church or for our own lives. We are free to enjoy what we like of our culture and our religion. We can happily forget the rest.

At best, this answer finds us in the same company as many of the skeptical religious 'experts' we see on television. At worst, it finds us in the same company as the religious leaders who hated Jesus. Either way, it leaves us without a Savior.

It *may* be that we honestly do not know the answer to the question. Just trying to keep up with our responsibilities takes all our time. We have our families, our jobs, our community, and our duties in the Church to think about. We simply have not had the time to investigate *Who* Jesus really is. To be honest, the question has not been at the top of our priority list.

Or, perhaps we find "I do not know" the best answer because we are afraid of what people in the Church might think of us if we said "Jesus was only a man." They might think we are not good Armenians.

Or we may be afraid that if we say "Jesus is truly God," people may expect a lot more of us than we are willing to be. The whole question makes us feel uncomfortable and we would just like to forget it and move on. After all religion and politics are private matters, right? The unfortunate thing about this position is that someday, when we stand before the Judge of all mankind, we will be forced to give the right answer. But then, it will be too late.

That brings us to the last possible answer: "Jesus' authority is from God, because He is God." Some people, even some on the altar, *may* give this answer, not out of a real sense of conviction, but because they have always been taught that this is part of our Armenian belief system, so naturally this is the proper answer. Every Sunday, *if* we are present at the time, we dutifully repeat the Havadamk, letting the words slide off our tongues without first penetrating our minds. Yet, God is not interested so much in what we glibly *say* we believe, as in what He sees when He looks deep into our hearts.

What will it mean to our lives, if, after weighing the evidence, we believe with all our hearts, that Jesus is God Almighty? What will be the consequence if we believe that He is

One with the Father and the Holy Spirit? What attitude will be produced in us if we believe that He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? What effect should this belief have on our lives?

It should first of all make us thankful that this great God has loved us. It should make us *want* to worship Him. The “Soorp, Soorp” should be the cry of our hearts before Him not just during Badarak, but every time we see a beautiful sunset, or the smile of a child, or some other wonder that He has wrought. It should make us want to serve Him, not out of duty, but out of love for the magnificent Person that He is. Finally it should make us want to obey Him, the Highest Authority in Heaven and Earth. If this has not been true of us in the past, let us kneel in the sanctuary of our hearts and sing the “Der Voghormya” knowing that He is pleased to show all mercy, to cleanse us and restore in us that person He originally and gloriously purposed us to be.