

A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY LUKE 20:1-8, 20-26

Leadership comes in all kinds of shapes and forms. The world has seen a selection of people who have exercised leadership as dictators – Hitler, Mussolini, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Mao, now Mugabe (who has gone through a sham of an election to ignore the result for as long as he could and in previous elections he was the only candidate!) Where did they get their authority from? They took it by force; the people had no choice in the matter as these men simply grabbed power by force and made themselves the supreme leader. There are lots of them and if you were to question their authority, you would be arrested!

There is leadership of a different kind – the most expensive boxing match in history is the race to be Democratic candidate for US president between Barak and Hillary. They are fighting to be given authority by the American people to rule over them for the next 4 years and to bring their political agenda to the White House. Their authority comes from being voted into office by the people and they will promise to fulfil people's expectations of them; the people will decide in 4 years time whether that has been done and will either re-elect them or vote them out of office.

There is leadership of a different kind – there are people who influence the world, even though they are not rich and powerful, even though they hold no office – Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and others – people who, by the work they do, change people's attitudes. What authority do they have? They have none in a formal sense, but by the force of the kind of people they are and the work they do, they are given some kind of moral authority; they are people we look up to and we want to be like them because they have earned our respect and we value their leadership.

3 very different kinds of leadership and authority.

The questions that Jesus faced, and that we read in Luke chapter 20, were both about leadership and authority in one way or another, questions about His authority. We have jumped a little from last time; last time Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem through Jericho; today's reading takes place in Jerusalem and in between there has been Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into city on a donkey clearly claiming to be King of Jews. Not only that, but Jesus has gone into the Temple and has driven out those who were selling and trading there. So it seems reasonable to assume that the Jewish leaders had watched Jesus do this and began to question His authority – who gave Him the right to do that? Who does He think He is to chase these people out of the Temple, since we presume they were there with official permission?

"One day..." (20:1f) This was the first question – who gave you authority? Jesus turns the whole thing round and begins to ask them a question about John the Baptist: *"I will..." (20:3f)* Now the Jews are on the horns of a small dilemma and Luke explains it to us. If they said that John's baptism was from God and that he was sent by God then they stand accused of not listening to John and not believing him. If they say that his baptism and preaching was something John dreamed up for himself, then the people would riot because it was widely held that John was a prophet. Which will they choose? They have to make a choice here – is John someone sent by God? Or is he someone who dreamed the whole thing up for himself? They decide to sit on the fence - *"We don't know" (20:7)* but what they really mean is *"We won't say! We won't commit ourselves to an answer."* So Jesus says *"Neither will..." (20:8)*

This is not just a silly trick question from Jesus. John's ministry and Jesus' ministry were totally interlinked. When John came, people wanted to know who and what he was – was he the Messiah? No, but instead he is described as *"A voice..." (3:4)* John was a man who came to preach and baptise so that the people would be ready to

receive their King, Messiah, Jesus. So, if you're not going to believe John, then you are not going to receive Jesus as king; but on other hand, if you recognise John as a messenger sent from God, then you will see that Jesus is the One of whom John speaks. If John's baptism is from heaven, then Jesus is the Messiah sent from God with God-given power and authority; if John dreamt the whole thing up, then Jesus is acting out of line! By making no choice about John, the Jews are making no commitment about Jesus.

The Bible is clear that Jesus is King and Lord of all, with authority that God gave Him. He came into the world, sent by God to be the Saviour of the world; He came with power from God to do good in the world; He came with God-given authority to teach and command; He died on the cross to complete His work as Saviour and Messiah and was raised from the dead to live forever and returned to God as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, with the highest name in heaven and on earth; now He has God-given authority as Lord, as King and head of the Church. That's what Paul is trying to say in Colossian chapter 1 with all of these grand titles for Jesus, building up one on top of the other, trying to build up a picture of the greatness, power, authority, and supremacy of Jesus.

The second question helps us see what it means to call Jesus Lord! It is a trick question; the Jews thought it a clever question, because no matter how Jesus answered it, He would be in trouble. It was as all to do with taxes. "*Teacher...*" (20:21f) They butter him up first; they didn't believe it though! But then, the question – is it right to pay taxes or not? The Romans were the invading army; they ruled Israel at that time, and Pilate the governor is about to become world-famous later that week in the Easter story. But the Jews hated the Romans; they hated being occupied by the Roman army; they hated paying taxes to an invading, pagan army. 'So, Jesus, is it right to pay taxes? Tell us what you think?' He had two choices: yes or no! If He says 'yes' then the Jews will stone Him because they hated the Romans; if He said 'no' then they would hand Him over to the Romans and accuse Him of treason! They had Him over a barrel, or so they thought!

"*Show me...*" (20:24) The denarius was the most common coin; it would have on it a picture of Caesar, the emperor and may even have had inscription on it that called him a god, or some such. It would be the working currency of Israel; they would have no option because of Roman rule, but it was money the Jews hated; it was Caesar's money! So Jesus says "*give to...*" (20:25) 'Give' isn't strong enough; it suggests a gift given voluntarily whereas Jesus is talking about more than that, about fulfilling an obligation, fulfilling a responsibility. 'You have an obligation to Caesar to pay your taxes; fulfil that obligation. You have a greater obligation to God; fulfil that obligation as well!' All of a sudden the people who had asked this trick question are now the ones being questioned and challenged – 'how well are you fulfilling your obligations to God?' and Jesus' authority is being exercised quietly and without fuss, but it is clear to everyone who reads this story who is in charge. Jesus is in charge; Jesus is the One with authority, Jesus is the One who asks the questions that really matter; Jesus is the One to whom we really need to answer.

Jesus' message is simple: fulfil all of your obligations! The Jews had obligations to pay their taxes and they should fulfil that obligation; not to fulfil it was to court disaster needlessly. But they also had much bigger and deeper obligations to God and so they must fulfil these as well. Jesus is King and Lord of every aspect of life and His answer to their trick question shows that! We have obligations in many different areas of life: we have family obligations, to parents, children, other family members; we have obligations as citizens of the UK, to vote and pay taxes and obey the laws of the land; we have obligations at work, to do what our boss tells us, or to work as part

of a team, to do our job to the best of our ability; we have obligations to Church, if we have a job to do to do it to best of our ability and in the best attitude. All of these, and you may have others, are obligations we have and we have to fulfil all of these, in every aspect of life; Jesus is Lord of all of our life, not just a spiritual, religious part; He wants us to fulfil all of these obligations.

The deepest and biggest obligation we have is to God. Some people draw a fascinating parallel between the coin bearing Caesar's image and people bearing the image of God. The coin bearing Caesar's image represents an obligation to Caesar; as people we bear God's image and so we have an obligation to God. The Bible tells us that people are made in the image of God; that means that we are given the capacity to love and be loved; that we have the capacity to make moral choices, reasoned choices, understanding the difference between good and evil, right and wrong and a conscience that works on us when we make mistakes; we have the capacity and desire for worship, recognising the need to worship God as something deep inside us; this is what it means for us to be made in the image of God; this gives every human being a deep dignity and carries with it a deep sense of obligation.

Our obligation to God is to be all that He wants us to be and that He has made us to be. We have the capacity to love and be loved; so all of our relationships with other people should be full of love; wherever we meet people we should treat them lovingly. We have the capacity to make right and good choices and to avoid what is wrong and evil; so we should learn to choose what is good and avoid what is evil; that is our God-given obligation. We have the capacity to worship, so we should worship God with all our heart; that is more than coming to Church and engaging in religion; worship engages our hearts and minds in understanding how good God is and loving and gracious and kind and then responding with love in our hearts and worship, to give honour and praise to God from the bottom of our hearts.

Jesus is Lord; He has authority over us; this is a God-given authority because God has made Him King and Head of the Church. Jesus shows us how to live; Jesus commands us how to live; Jesus reminds us of our obligations. Obligation is a dirty word in our culture; we'd rather do things if we feel like it! In fact, we have obligations in every area of life; Jesus wants us to fulfil all of these obligations – to be good citizens, to be good family members, to be good workers, to be good bosses, to be good Church members, to be good Church leaders, above all to be good people, people who love, who do what is good, who worship with all our hearts. This is what Jesus wants from us; the only question that remains is - will we do it?