

AUTHORITY
MATTHEW 21:23-32

Rummage in your pockets, or in your handbag – what do the contents say about you? There are so many options in answer to that question that I'm not even going to suggest any answer to it, but leave it with you! If someone was trying to understand me and what makes me tick, what would the contents of my pockets tell them? What is there about us that tells people we are followers of Jesus? Is there anything? Is there something that gives us away as Christians? We might want to hide it; we might want to let the world know; there may be nothing! If someone is trying to understand you and why you come to church, what is there about you that would tell them something important?

Matthew 21 is entering into the last phase of Jesus' ministry. Conflict is building! These pieces that we read today are all about that conflict between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus Himself. It will only intensify as the days pass in what is the last week of Jesus' life; it will end on the cross! The question today is all about authority: "*By what...*" (Matthew 21:23) There are all sorts of answers to that question: "God" would be the easiest and simplest answer; or "look at the miracles and people whose lives are changed" would be another answer, validating His ministry as sent from God. But Jesus gives neither of these answers; instead He replies with a question of His own, about John the Baptist. "*John's baptism...*" (Matthew 21:25) The leaders are left with a dilemma: "*If we...*" (Matthew 21:25f) What are they to say? They answer "*We don't know.*" (Matthew 21:27) That's not what they mean; they really mean "We're not prepared to say; we don't want to answer." So Jesus is not prepared to say; He doesn't tell them!

Jesus is Lord! Christians have confessed their faith like this since the beginning! Jesus is Lord! Jesus has authority and when we begin to unpick that, there's a whole lot of meaning in these three little words. Jesus is Lord who loves; Jesus is Lord who died; Jesus is Lord who lives forever – these are His credentials.

Jesus is Lord who loves. When asked that question, "*By what authority...*" Jesus could have pointed to the people He helped; the blind see, the lame walk and so on, and that would have been the right answer. These are the actions of the Messiah sent from God, according to the Old Testament promises. Jesus came to love and care for people in need and that became the hallmark of His ministry and is still part of Jesus' ministry that attracts people, even those who don't follow Him. Jesus is still Lord who loves: we see so many people in power and authority in the world who are only in it for the glory and the power and the wealth and for throwing their weight around, that Jesus goes against the grain in so many ways. Jesus is Lord who loves and cares for us and whose love for us will never end.

Jesus is Lord who died. By the end of the week in which this conversation takes place, Jesus will be dead, crucified. Part of that story is about the conflict and machinations of these stories, but the heart of the story is the love that Jesus has for the world. He put Himself in the way of the cross for the salvation of the world; it was God's way for Jesus to complete His ministry and Jesus put Himself in the way of the cross because He loved the world, and loved us. The centre of the gospel and the centre of the communion service is Jesus who died. We remember and celebrate the One who laid down His life for us, who died that we might be forgiven, whose cross is the centre of the gospel of the wisdom and the power of God at work in the world.

Jesus is Lord who lives. The cross is not the end of the story: Jesus was raised by the power of God to live forever. On the third day, the tomb was empty! That is an unassailable fact, borne witness to by so many people, women first and then the disciples and then others. The tomb is empty; Jesus is raised and lives forever. Communion is not a memorial to a dead hero, but the celebration of a living Saviour! Jesus is Lord who lives and because He lives, He is

able to save us completely, He is able to answer our prayers and He is able to help us live our lives well by the power of the Spirit.

These are Jesus' credentials; why should we listen to Jesus? Because He is the Lord who loves, who has died, and who lives! It goes against the grain for the world; authority is held by the strong and powerful people, the people who show how strong they are by oppressing those who don't agree with them. Jesus' values are different: He is the Lord who loves, who has died on the cross and who lives. This is the Jesus we confess when we say "Jesus is Lord!"

These are our credentials too. We are to be a people who love, a people who have died and a people who live a new life. They're all mixed together. We are to be people who love, who love God and love other people; we are to be people who die to self, to ego, who give up doing what "I want"; we are to be people who live a life serving Jesus, learning to be people that Jesus wants and so loving God and caring for others more than ourselves. People who love, people who have died to ego, people who live for Jesus – is that what we are? Are these our credentials as Christians? This is more than the contents of our pockets or handbags, but is the very fabric of our lives. Jesus is Lord! We His people?