



29 January 2012
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Sung Eucharist
Revelation 12 vv. 1–5a
Mark 1 vv. 21–28

On what authority..?

By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor
The Dean of St John's College

And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority. (Mark 1:21)

On what authority do you choose to obstruct the will of Government on a policy which seems to enjoy terrific public support?

The question was put to the Bishop of Leicester, Tim Stevens (who is in passing our preacher at evensong tonight), a few days ago, following the Government's defeat in the House of Lords. The issue at stake was the status of child benefit as a universal benefit and the Church of England bishops played a key role in the defeat of the government on the vote.

'on what authority... choose...obstruct the will..'

It is of course a fairly typical *Newsnight* question delivered by Jeremy Paxman which challenged the source of the authority exercised by bishops in the Upper House on the presumption that only democratic, that is elected, authority should be regarded as properly legitimate.

Disputes over the nature and sources of authority are central to human social life, and indeed such speculation also lie at the heart of our Gospel reading this morning. The crowds are astonished at Jesus's teaching and actions; it is so unexpected: he has neither the status nor the formal learning of the legitimate, the normal, the expected source of religious authority, that is of course, the scribes. And yet he has authority: where does it come from?

The nature of authority, that is the moral or legal power or right to command or influence the will and actions of others, and the ways in which that authority is exercised, are complex and incredibly varied: Sometimes they take predictable forms – the teacher, the judge, the minister; sometimes they do not. And of course life and death hang upon it: You will recall from the August riots the name of Tariq Johan (Yah-han) whose dignified appeal following the death of his son carried great moral authority and without doubt prevented further violence; by contrast we are all too well aware of the fate of the cruise ship, the Costa Concordia, and the shortcomings of its Captain.

These two examples remind us that whether authority is being exercised or responded to, the individual, us, me, also bears responsibility. So when we are on the receiving end: We may not always 'buy into' the decisions or actions; we may simply 'let it wash over us'; we may rail against it; we may respond with a cynical passivity, we may quietly seek to undermine it; or, we may conform to it grateful that it can relieve us of some decision-making responsibility. We may also be aware that, like the Costa Captain we are not always as in control as we may like to think – often our responses to authority follow a pattern, a script: a script written by the shape of our personality; by past experiences of power exercised over us by parents, school, employers. Our individual will, our ability to respond, to decide or indeed to exercise authority ourselves is then part of a much larger story than we may wish to admit. We are, to put it another way – Author-ed –and unless we are able to learn something of the way in which powerful influences have shaped our story, we will always struggle to handle that troublesome central character – ourselves.

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When we contemplate ‘by what authority’, what is at stake then is pretty fundamental – it is our will, our decision-making ability, our freedom to act for the good, and here the Scriptures (and indeed the annals of human History) paint a very realistic and vivid picture of the shortcomings of human authority and the ways in which people exercise power. It is not simply that humans abuse power for their gain (which they do) but that almost all forms of human authority over-estimate their ability to know what is the right path ahead: blessed by the capacity to look backwards and make sense of the past, they, we, are overly-confident about what is to come.

With respect to Paxman, the capacity to formulate sharp, penetrating questions is the easy bit, it is not remotely matched by our ability to formulate convincing answers, either in word or deed

We are not natural captains of our own souls and the more we allow that illusion to take hold, the closer the rocks come, but if we give ourselves real space to contemplate the sources of our own words and actions, and acknowledge our own shortcomings in the process, and seek diligently, with humility after wisdom we will discover slowly but powerfully our own voice, and that is Author-ed by the Author and Giver of Life itself, Jesus Christ. Amen