Matthew 21:23-32

There are a number of words which always get my hackles up when it comes to talking about the church. One of them is the word “authority”. I am nervous of the word, because I think we struggle, perhaps particularly in an age of 360° reviews, capability procedures and an ever-proliferating hierarchy in almost every walk of life, to understand the word authority as Christians should.

Interestingly in today’s gospel the words crops up four times in five verses. And again, we meet Jesus in one of his fairly combative interactions with the chief priests and the elders of the people. Jesus is teaching in the temple, and this really gets up the noses of those in authority, so they rock up to him and ask him for his credentials: “by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority”? In other words, can you please show me your exam certificates?

And we know, from the way in which this passage unfolds, and from the wider witness of the gospel, that, as in many things, motivation is everything. The chief priests and the elders are not so much interested here in protecting the people from a false teacher as they are in dealing with a maverick who is threatening the status quo with his extraordinary claims about a world turned upside down; about the mighty being put down from their seat, and about the humble and meek being exalted.

And Jesus calls them on this. Not only does he call them on it, but he then delivers another sucker punch to these defenders of the hierarchy. He tells the parable of the vineyard, in which he explicitly accuses the chief priests and the elders of being like a son who lies to his father.

Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you says Christ. And he’s saying it to those who fail to actually obey the commands of God, because they mistake their own authority for that of the Lord. And that means that Christ is saying that to me, at least some of the time. Because I fall into exactly that trap of making myself the centre of my world; putting my seat on the top of the pile and calling it a throne. Saying that I will go and work in the vineyard, and then skulking off to the sofa instead.

We fall into all sorts of traps when we become obsessed with authority. Status.

I think I’m right in saying that the word authority only occurs once in the ordination service of deacons. I might be wrong, and I’m sure someone will correct me. When our curate, Ali, was made Deacon yesterday there were a lot of words said to, and at, her. And almost none of them were about authority. As I say, I think there is one occasion, where the ordinand is required to recognise the authority of the Bishop, but almost all of the language is about service.

For those of us who weren’t able to gather in the cathedral with Ali due to the coronavirus restrictions, let me just offer you two lines from the ordination of deacons which I think help us to set authority in its proper context:

Here’s the first: “deacons are to seek nourishment from the Scriptures, to be faithful in prayer, expectant and watchful for the signs of God’s presence, as he reveals his kingdom among us”
God ordains people, not because they are better, cleverer, or holier than other people. God ordains people to model some truths. And the truth is that God is interested in modelling here are those of faithfulness, expectancy, and watchfulness. Ali comes among us as a deacon to remind us all to be faithful, to be watchful, and to expect the kingdom to come. These are not characteristics to which you describe words like power, might, dominance. No, these are characteristics of steadiness, of hope and of optimism.

And the other passage from the ordination service; and I remember these words from my own ordination to the diaconate 15 years ago: “Remember always with thanksgiving that the people among whom you will minister are made in God’s image and likeness. In serving them you are serving Christ himself, before whom you will be called to account. You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God.”

In serving our brothers and sisters, in serving the community of the church, in serving the world, we are serving Christ himself. And we remember that other great passage of Scripture from the same gospel: “whatever you did for the least of your brothers and sisters, you did it for me, says the Lord.”

Language of service. We serve because we follow the Lord. But we also serve because we serve the Lord.

This is a great weekend for St Thomas’s. We have a new Deacon amongst us. Someone who will model for us our life of service. Someone who will remind us to be faithful in prayer, expectant, and watchful for the signs of the kingdom.

There’s nothing in that job description by which we could argue for a significant pay rise. There’s nothing in that job description that we could use to evidence high-level strategic management in our next job interview.

But by letting go of the authority obsession we recognise the extraordinary privilege of the life of God’s deacons: to spot the kingdom coming, and prepare the way for our King.

Amen.