

Dear Friends,

This week's gospel reading starts with the Jewish leaders questioning the authority of Jesus. Who does he think he is, going into the temple and speaking like this? He has no right to be doing that sort of thing, it's a disgrace. We can be fairly confident that Jesus wasn't an officially trained rabbi - if he was they could hardly have objected to what he was doing. However it was obvious even to his enemies that Jesus did have authority. Jesus made an impression, he made an impression on the learned people as well as the crowds.

Authority can take different forms, it can be a good thing but it can also be a bad thing. It is good to be authoritative, but it is wrong to be authoritarian. There have been many very powerful authoritarian figures who have done an immense amount of harm. Many people recognised the authority of Jesus, but it was a very positive form of authority. Jesus was not an authoritarian, he never used his power in a forceful or coercive way. Jesus was a man of great authority and charisma, but it went with a godliness and goodness that people recognised.

We can sometimes recognise godliness and goodness in people, there are those who impress us by their holiness or goodness. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, was my theology tutor at Cambridge. There was something indefinably holy about him even as a young man. It was said that even when he wiped the board it was almost a sacred act, and that isn't as facetious as it may sound.

Sometimes we recognise that godliness and goodness in action. Jo Tuffnel is the daughter of Sir Anthony Berry, a Conservative MP who was killed when the Grand Hotel in Brighton was bombed by the IRA. She went out of her way to get to know and befriend Patrick Magee, the IRA man who killed her father. We know instinctively that it is good and right to try to create something positive out of such evil.

When we recognise such goodness or godliness in people we are impressed. We are more likely to listen to what they say, we are more likely to take them seriously. Of course the corollary of that is that if we want to speak with authority, if we want people to listen to what we say, then we do have to practise what we preach. We have to live out the gospel if we want people to take it seriously. Someone once said that the church should be had up under the Trades Descriptions Act because the reality of church life is so different from the theory. It's very sad if that is the case, but sometimes the church does give a very poor example of the Christian faith in action.

Jesus on the other hand gives us a powerful example of love in action. Jesus emptied himself, he humbled himself and came to live and die among us in obedience to God. Previous generations talked about the "Imitation of Christ". They didn't mean that we should be able to copy Christ completely, none of us can do that. But we are challenged to imitate Jesus in our lives so that others may see his love in us.

Best wishes,

Mark