

Have you ever known of anyone who cannot really deal with authority, someone who doesn't really respect authority? I know that parents at times wonder who is really in charge when it comes to issuing instructions. They say that the first word that a child learns is 'No' – the defiance of the child over the parent seems to happen very early in their development doesn't it.

Authority is the theme running throughout today's gospel. The chief priests and elders take issue with Jesus' authority. The parable that Jesus gives is all about two sons who challenge their father's authority. And even at that, they're not the only ones with authority issues today.

Because I would challenge all of us, that we all have authority issues but I am not talking about authority issues in the way we usually understand them. I'm actually talking about whether we recognize and submit to the authority of Jesus, His Holy Spirit that convicts us each day and our Father God? We would all probably answer by saying, of course we recognise God's authority, but then is this lived out in our daily lives? I think all of us are guilty of undermining God's authority over us, and that's because each of us has the freewill to choose whether to obey it or not.

In today's society, we often confuse authority, based on someone's credentials or expertise. If someone has a history of successes and accomplishments, status and reputation, then typically we will respect their authority. However more and more we are disappointed by those in authority because of how far many fall from grace.

But more and more in such a liberal society, you see rather uncomfortable situations where someone will say, "Who do you think you are?" "What gives you the right to tell me what to do?" Or how about "You're not the boss of me!" More and more we don't like someone else teaching us, correcting us, or telling us what to do. Even in my role as a minister, society no longer considers us to have authority. And that's what we hear in the challenge of the chief priests and elders to Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" We see it in the refusal of the two sons to go to the vineyard.

But I suppose where I want us to think further today, is around the authority that we have, and it's seen in our reading today. The story of the man with two sons shows the man speaking instructing his first son to go to the vineyard, but the son initially says no. Now in that time, for a son to disobey their father would have been a major thing. Today nothing seems to happen when a child doesn't obey their father – in fact at times in my own house I wonder who actually is in charge. Who is the boss?

So let me push you a little bit on this authority issue. From the parable today, if you think God is the boss of you, then you've misunderstood the story. The father gave instruction to the sons, but it was ultimately up to the sons to decide for themselves. And similarly God may direct us through his word, but ultimately it is down to us his children to decide whether we respect his authority. It therefore might seem striking for me to say that God is not the boss of you. God is not the boss of me.

God is not the boss of us. God is our supreme Lord. Every day God authorizes us to enter and sends us into his vineyard, to act in this world with his authority and on his behalf through the gifts he has bestowed upon each one of us. The authority has been given to us. That's why Jesus declared in the great commission, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". It's not in our name we are to do things, it's in his name and his authority.

And that's where the chief priests and elders failed to understand. They chose to exchange their God-given authority for human power. They were so used to people doing what they said. They couldn't deal now with a man in front of them that wasn't complying to their authority. And that's what's happening in much of our world today.

In the absence of true authority there will always be power struggles. Look at the politics of our country. Look at the wars throughout the world. Look at the conflicts in your own relationships. Those are about power, not authority. Our leaders exercise power but very few exercise authority. The chief priests and elders wanted power but they didn't know how to exercise the authority that was given to them by God.

You see people who understand the authority placed on them are not concerned about themselves. They do not dominate or control you. They inspire you. They cause you to re-evaluate your life, change your mind, and live differently. That sounds an awful lot like Jesus and it's very different from those who exercise power.

There are people in this parish who have no leadership position, title, or theological credentials and yet they have such great authority. I see it in their compassion and gentleness. I hear it in the way they pray. I feel it in their love for me and others. They don't make it about themselves. That's because they understand the authority that has been given to them.

All authority originates in God, but it is not exclusive to God. God shares his authority with us. The authority God shares with us is nothing less than his own divine attributes. That shared authority exists in us and is revealed by us as the many and varied gifts, God has imparted on each of our lives. That means every one of us that is in Christ has authority. As your minister I do not have more authority than you. I do not have better authority than you. I just have a different authority. God gives each of us gifts and authority unique to our lives. God is generous, extravagant, with the gifts he gives and the authority he shares. We all have God-given gifts and authority.

There is no one without authority. The difference isn't that some have authority and others don't. The difference is that some recognize and exercise their authority and others do not. Regardless, God knows and sees the authority he has given us and waits for us to see and know it too. And when we do, we change our mind like the first son and go to the vineyard.

So now that we understand the authority we have, I'd like to leave us with this question - What gifts, what divine attributes, has God bestowed upon you? Are you living from that authority and sharing those gifts? Are you respecting the authority that God has given to you? Remember that whilst God is supreme, he gives you the authority to decide whether you will follow his instruction, or like most of the world, do your own thing. It's for us to choose.