

Under Authority

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, 6 September 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Ezekiel 33: 7-11; Psalm 119: 33-40; Romans 13: 1-10; Matthew 18: 10-20

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today's readings are about being under authority: God's authority, the authority of the state, and authority in the Church. But what a widely unappealing topic that is! As for God's authority, William Blake speaks for many with his complaint that 'priests in black gowns were walking their rounds and binding with briars my joys and desires'. As for state authority, progressives since the 1960s have been questioning that authority in the name of freedom and equality, with attacks on the extent of entrenched power and self-interest. In response, the hard right likes to claim a divine mandate, righteously angry whenever critical voices are raised. The only thing that many such champions of conservatism won't like in our epistle today is the bit about paying taxes. As for Church authority, it's being openly defied in once traditional Catholic societies like Ireland with the embrace of same-sex marriage, and dismissed more widely in

light of the child abuse scandal. For Anglicans, any notion that the Church might have authority over the laity would rarely occur to anyone.

Well, it's clear what God's agenda is in these matters. A single authority from God underpins the authority of state and Church, but we have to make sure that we don't misunderstand what this means. God's authority is for the good of human beings, and for the wellbeing of God's Church. Jesus in our Gospel today opens his address on behalf of the little ones who are close to God's heart. He's the shepherd who isn't obsessed with the status quo—either opposing it with the progressives or obsessing over its preservation with the conservatives. While their eyes are guaranteed to be on what's happening with the ninety-nine, Jesus the good shepherd goes out after the lost one. Consider this the starting point of God's politics: concern for human beings, especially for those in particular need.

Ezekiel in our first reading today makes very clear that God wants to protect us from ourselves, to ensure that we don't get ourselves into trouble. God does this is by sending us prophets. Either they convey God's warnings to the community, or *they* bear responsibility for whatever bad outcome might follow. Of course, this is an invitation to cranks everywhere who pretend that their craziness really comes

with divine authority. But for authentic prophets, we now have the likes of Greta Thunberg in the area of climate change, as we had Martin Luther King in the area of race relations.

Many Christian saints bear this prophetic mantle, with their eye trained by Jesus the good shepherd. I can't help thinking of the Polish Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe in this connection. He wasn't political, but he remembered Jesus' love for the lost one and he left the ninety-nine to save him. He asked the Nazi concentration camp authorities for permission to take the place of a Jewish husband and father, when prisoners were being randomly selected for reprisal killings. I remember praying in Fr Kolbe's death cell at Auschwitz, which the faithful have set up as a shrine. He provided a good example of what God's authority looks like when it's at work: it looks like the good shepherd dying for his lost sheep, while calling out the murderous lies of perverted this-worldly authority. We need have nothing to fear from an authority like this, though it is universally resisted by tyrants and it ultimately brings them undone.

There have of course been many German Christians over the centuries who read today's Epistle as a call for submission to the state in whatever circumstances, even when the authorities did terrible things that affronted Christians' consciences. Martin Luther helped teach Germany to be docile and obedient no matter what. It

took the likes of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the other plotters against Hitler to begin challenging this political quietism, and later in 1989 it was a church in East Berlin where prophetic protests took place that led eventually to the Berlin Wall coming down. So what is Paul telling us that we should be doing today with respect to state authority?

I think he's simply telling us to respect the rule of law and to acknowledge the benefits of a well-ordered society as a blessing from God. God deploys the rule of law as a benefit to both Church and community: as some of you will remember from *The Book of Common Prayer*, "for the punishment of wickedness and vice and the maintenance of thy true religion and virtue".

There's nothing in today's epistle, though, that would stop us from protesting against injustice or voting out a bad government. Within the rule of law, and as part of a democratic society, such actions are entirely appropriate and necessary. God is a preserver but also an upsetter of structures, whichever best serves the cause of shepherding and blessing. There's no room in God's loving heart for either entrenched conservative self-interest or for revolutionary anarchy. Rather, God brings a new order to birth within the ebb and flow of political history, and God's authority can't be annexed

entirely to any political cause. We have to remember what it is that God's doing.

Now, last time I talked with you it was about the Church, which consists of way more than an optional backdrop to our private religious preferences. Today in our Gospel Jesus seeks to ensure the spiritual well-being of his Church, calling for Christian maturity in the handling of conflict. He expects that inappropriate and offensive behaviour in the congregation will be called out, owned up to, repented of, and set aside. You can't do or say or be whatever you want in the Church, with nice Anglicans quietly rolling their eyes behind your back while never dreaming of saying anything to you.

But the challenge here is inescapable. Matthew's Jesus gives us a wise program for dealing forthrightly with Christians who are starting to do damage in the congregation. His aim isn't to impose rules as an arbitrary exercise in power; Jesus knows just how quickly that approach will get people's backs up and make things worse. So he commends a low-key private approach first. If someone won't back off and gets on their high horse, then Jesus' counsel is to go back with one or two members of the Church and try again, gently making it semi-official. This continues to give the person a further chance to back down while still saving face. If they can't rise to the grace of this approach, however, the matter must then become one for the whole

congregation. And once again, if the person remains invincibly stubborn and self-willed, the breakdown of relations that follows is on them.

I've tried to follow this teaching myself on a few occasions during my ministry in parishes and as head of a theological college, and I must confess that it's met with mixed success,. Anyone taking this most un-Anglican approach risks being shown the door themselves. The problem is that Anglicans typically don't recognise that the Church has any authority over their behaviour, which is regarded as entirely a private matter. And not just recalcitrant lay people; clergy, too, can prove intractable. So now we have to put up with regrettable and intrusive codes of good practice throughout Australian Anglicanism, with tribunals judiciously enforcing them. There are bishops who take to all this with relish because it gives them a way of forcing out disfavoured clergy who used to be unbudgeable. This proves what can go wrong when the Church abandons a spiritual and theological approach for its problems and retreats to managerialism and governance.

Anyway, friends, whether it's the authority of God or of the state or of the Church, the call in our readings today is to recognise God's loving purposes, which are operative at every level. It's all about human thriving, and God's eagle eyed regard for the vulnerable. It's

not about keeping or breaking rules: authority isn't to be fetishized, but neither is it to be flouted in an adolescent manner. And it certainly isn't about settling for any sort of bland middle.

Instead, Christians are under God's authority, called to respect the rule of law and to be a mutually accountable Church. This is to make Christians into agents of peace, of grace, of forgiveness. That way we can become humanising witnesses to a different way of doing things, in a world full of shrill, dangerous, invincibly impenitent fools, chancers, bullies and liars.

The Lord be with you ...