

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Year B

The questions of authority are of top concern to every society and to every institution within a society. Who is in charge? Why are they in charge? What is the nature of their authority? How is their authority to be exercised?

I have thought of these questions in past weeks. Today's gospel reading also speaks of the authority. "The people were astonished at his teaching,

for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." What was the nature of Jesus authority? Where did it come from? What was behind it?

The first thing was truth. This was his stock in trade. He quietly and simply told the people the eternal truth about life. There was nothing worried about it. He did not shout, or argue, or seek to prove his point. He simply stated his case and let it stand. Truth is like that. It does not need to argue. It can afford to wait.

For many centuries, people believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the sun revolved around it. Then there came along a Polish astronomer named Nicholas Copernicus, who held to a different theory. He believed that the sun was the center of our solar system, and that the earth and all other planets within the system were revolving around the sun. Almost no one agreed with him. His theory was so unpopular and revolutionary that he was afraid to release it.

But shortly before his death in the sixteenth century, he published his masterwork, entitled “Concerning the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres.” Very soon his theory was accepted by all competent scientists and eventually by the people. What did it matter that he stood virtually alone? He knew the truth and could afford to wait.

So it was with Jesus. So it always is with truth. So it had better be with us, with our nation, with our homes, with our church. We must deal with the real issues and keep our minds open to truth. That is the only way anyone has any right to exercise authority over the minds and lives of others. A government that lies to its people in order to control them cannot last long. Parents who refuse to level with the children will very soon lose their authority. A religion that is more devoted to self-serving ideas than it is to the truth will, sooner or later, lose the hearts and minds of the people.

All valid authority is rooted in truth. We are not always certain what that is, but our minds must be seeking it, and our hearts must be willing to accept it.

A second fact about the authority of Jesus is that it was exercised through persuasion. Jesus never tried to force his ideas or his will on anyone. He told his truth, and let it speak for itself. All people were free to accept it or reject it, and still are. In the final analysis, that is the only way that lasting authority can be exercised.

This, of course, is not to deny that some degree of force is necessary in a society, in a home, or in a school. We would be very unwise to disband our police force and simply plead with the people to do right. In every society, there is an element that would refuse to heed that plea. Parents would be unwise to renounce all force and deal with their children strictly by trying to convince them. There are times when a disobedient child must be controlled in a stricter manner. But over the long haul, the only authority that really works is the authority of persuasive good-will.

No government can rule forever by force. They cannot recruit enough soldiers nor hire enough policemen to keep themselves in power. Eventually, they must rule by consent of the people, or their leadership is doomed to fail. The same thing is true in a home or in a school. A limited degree of force is periodically necessary, but that had better not be the primary program. If it is, the breakdown and failure of authority is coming.

Parents, you can impose your will and your ideas on your children for a few years. But this must be done in love and with a deep commitment to truth and fairness. Otherwise, you will see the day when your children will turn their backs on your values and walk away. And when that day comes, there will not be one thing you can do about it. The only lasting authority you will exercise over your children will be persuasion.

How much more is this true in the realm of religion? We, in the church, have no club to hold over the heads of people. And even if we did, we would be terribly unwise to use it. If we cannot convince the world to the truth of our message and sincerity of our love, we can forget it, because we have nothing else with which to win them. That is how Jesus has held his grip on the hearts and minds of people across the centuries. His truth cannot be denied, and his cross has convinced us he really cares. **Amen.**