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Authority: to Whom Shall We Go?

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*A sermon preached on the text John 6:66-71 at St. Mary's, the University Church at Cambridge on 6 May 1979 under the general theme of "Voices of Authority."*

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The Gospel according to St. John, Chapter 6: v.v. 66 and following: "After this many of Jesus' disciples drew back and no longer went along with him. He said to the twelve 'Will you also go away?' Simon Peter answered him: 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God.'"

This word of Peter to Jesus comes at the end of a very long series of arguments which began with a kind of popular movement to make Jesus the leader of a liberation struggle. It ends with the people all turning away from him, and his disciples even beginning to desert. At this moment Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them a quite open question: "Are you going to desert too?" They are free to leave. Peter answers with this confession freely given and yet surely utterly binding: "We have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God." A free personal commitment to an authority which has a right of way over every other authority that man can conceive of. It is that confession which makes Peter the rock, the corner stone for the new living temple that Jesus will build.

I am interested that the theme of authority has been chosen for these sermons because authority on the whole is a bad word at the present time. To call a man or a system authoritarian is to condemn the man or the system. It is true, of course, that that other adjective "authoritative" doesn't have such a bad smell. That word is most often used to describe something which has behind it a weight of knowledge which we are not competent to question. It is typically used of the pronouncements of experts whose findings we are bound to accept because they come with the unchallenged authority of the science of the establishment.

Modern science particularly has accustomed us to accept as an ideal the sort of knowledge that does not involve personal commitment, knowledge which has been demonstrated in such a way that no sane person can question it. To accept that kind of authority, the authoritative statements of science, for example, does not involve any personal risk. One is almost bound to accept it if one is to remain part of human society, and when we say that a certain pronouncement

is authoritative we mean usually that it has the imprimatur of the scientific community. On the other hand, authority exercised in a personal way not as representing an expert tradition but as simply a personal authority, is, on the whole, something that we are inclined to regard with a good deal of suspicion.

The question of authority rose very early in the ministry of Jesus. People noticed that he spoke as one with authority and not as the Scribes. The Scribes were a typical example of authoritative teaching. They had behind them the authority of the law, they were experts in the tradition for the interpretation of the law. In that sense their teaching was authoritative. But Jesus spoke in a quite different way. Jesus quoted the law and then said "But I say to you", and that placed the hearer in a dilemma, in the position of having to make a personal decision. He could reject the implied authority and fall back again upon that which was authoritative, the law. He was free to do so. Or he could accept the authority of Jesus. But that meant a personal commitment which was total and which was open-ended. It meant giving to Jesus a final allegiance which has right of way over the most sacred and binding of all other authorities. It was to that kind of total allegiance that Jesus called men and women and calls them today. To accept it means to come under the authority of Jesus in such a way that all other authority is relativised, subordinated to his.

Let me make four simple points about what it means to accept the authority of Jesus. It means first of all a decision for which I must take full personal responsibility. There is no coercion. As with the first disciples we are free to say "No", but if we say "Yes" it can only be an action of the very centre of our being. There is no question of relying on somebody else's authority. There is in our contemporary Western Society, in which the dominant social forces are profoundly pagan, no question of accepting the invitation of Jesus on the basis that it is a widely accepted claim. The invitation is addressed to me personally and requires a personal response for which I am personally responsible, whether that is "Yes" or "No".

Secondly, to say "Yes" is to enter into an open-ended commitment. To accept the authority of Jesus as final is not to have an answer to all the questions or a solution to all the problems. It is to embark upon a course of exploration in which we are always learning new things, always having to revise our opinions but never wandering about in a kind of futile meandering among all the possible options. The Christian experience in this respect is not different from all human experience of trying to understand things as they are. We only begin to understand by starting with certain clues and accepting them as a starting point. And with these clues we probe, we explore, we test and question and experiment, and the result of these probings brings us back again to our original clues with new and enlarged understanding and perhaps with critical questions. And so we set out again. It is so with the Christian adventure.

To give total allegiance to Jesus doesn't mean an end to exploring and questioning and testing. It is the beginning of a life-time of exploration. The phrase "Jesus is the answer" can be a very false and misleading phrase. It means that we try to co-opt Jesus for our small aims and ambitions. That, you will remember, is exactly how this long argument in John 6 started. It started with a group of people who wanted to make Jesus king. "Jesus is the answer" was exactly their slogan. But Jesus was not the answer to their question. To follow him would mean an adventure very different from what they imagined and that is why most of them very quickly dropped away.

It is now just 50 years since Jesus laid hold of me here in this University and started me out on the adventure of faith, and I can honestly say that these fifty years have hardly been enough to begin asking all the questions that I want to ask: I didn't dream then of all the ways I would be led to. I don't know what further ways there are to travel. What I do know is that the journeys have been a glowing adventure in understanding, an adventure so rich that I press forward eagerly for what is still to come.

Thirdly, the allegiance to which Jesus calls us is a total allegiance. It cannot be balanced against any other claim and it cannot be validated by arguments drawn from some other source. Of course, it is not that way at the beginning. When Jesus first meets us we inevitably begin by trying to place him in the world as we know it. The Hindu sees Jesus as a Jevan Mukta, as one of

those great souls who have, even in this life, come to the full realization of truth. The Moslem sees him as one of the great line of messengers of Allah which culminates in Mohammed, and the contemporary Western man sees Jesus and places him quite comfortably in that distinguished category of the founders of the world religions and knows exactly which page of TIME magazine to put him in, not in world affairs but in what is called "religion".

We were reminded in the lesson that we read (Matthew 16 vv 13-20) that Jesus' contemporaries did exactly the same. They classed him with Elijah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist. He was another prophet. That is how we always begin, we have to begin by placing him in the world that we know. But Jesus' disrupts these classifications. Those who called him one of the prophets found in the end that they could only condemn him as a blasphemer. When you really face the total fact of Jesus as the New Testament presents it to us, you simply cannot fit him in to the Hindu or the Moslem or the modern scientific world view which has dominated the thinking of the Western world for the last two centuries. You simply cannot fit the resurrection into any view of the world except one of which it is the starting point. But then it is the starting point for a wholly new way of grasping the full reality of our experience. You cannot, to take a rather contemporary example, start out with your own definitions of the word God and the word Man and then make any kind of sense of the affirmation that Jesus is both God and Man.

But, this doesn't happen at once. Inevitably you begin by trying to understand Jesus in terms of the models you already know and use, but eventually you come to the point when you realise that your models, your patterns of thought, your very axioms have to be reconsidered in the light of the total fact of Jesus. If you try to fit him into another frame you have to trim and twist the picture to do it. You find yourself saying over and over again "but I can't believe that" and so you have a trimmed down picture to fit your frame. But if you are willing to take the original testimony to Jesus as we have it in the New Testament as your starting point, to go on working with it, to take the risks involved in trusting it, you begin to find that a pattern is emerging which enables you to make sense, not just theoretical sense but practical sense of this strange and perplexing and often dark and agonising world in which our lives are lived, and I'm saying that because I have found it true.

And the fourth point about this commitment to Jesus is that strangely in binding us to him, it sets you free. There is a kind of authority that destroys your freedom, we know that, and in rebellion against that kind of authority we often pursue a kind of illusory idea of freedom, the idea that each of us could become a kind of free-floating monad in an infinite universe. Some religious traditions have nourished that illusion, but we have only to think about it to realise that we do not become free as we accept free and responsible relationships with others. Every attempt to define human nature apart from these interpersonal relationships of love and trust and responsibility ends in nonsense. There is a great deal of nonsense in the world and a great many people make a lot of money out of propagating it. The truth is that one can only state the facts in a paradoxical form. We are truly free only when we are bound in love and trust and responsibility to the one who is the author of our freedom because he is the author of our being. There is only one authority that can make us free and that is the authority of the one from whom our being comes. It is that authority which meets us in Jesus, and claims a free and responsible allegiance.

"To whom shall we go?" Our answer, like Peter's can only be a personal commitment. It may only be a feeble, faltering, groping sort of commitment as Peter's was, but when we have made it we find again, strangely, that we are in hands stronger than our own. Because we are talking about a personal commitment.

Will you forgive me if I speak in a personal way? Exactly 50 years ago, at the end of my first year as an undergraduate here, I was in a situation where I had made a thorough mess of what I was trying to do, and at that point, in a way that I cannot explain, God somehow put into my mind a vision of the Cross. I saw it at that moment as the one reality that could bridge the gap, the gulf between my ideal and the reality that I knew. The years since have been an exploration of the meaning of that vision. When the powers of evil in the world and in myself have seemed to be overwhelming, I have been again and again reminded of that vision, of that Cross, of that one

place in all the human storage where all the powers of evil, of sin, of death were met and mastered and vanquished. And as I have moved around during these 50 years in all the six continents and entered into the faiths and ideologies that compete for man's allegiance, and felt the truth and power of many of them, I have, nevertheless, felt myself coming back again and again to that one place where truth conquered the lie, where life conquered death, where hope was born out of despair, Hope, not just for me, but for the world, for God's whole creation. Not only hope in the weak sense of the word but hope in the strong Biblical sense for the firm assurance that can be trusted of a new creation in which God reigns over all.

Many things that seemed to be fixed landmarks 50 years ago have disappeared and many things that seemed to me quite simple and certain then have become much more doubtful and perplexing, but one thing stands out with greater clarity as the journey goes on, the fact of Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen, reigning Lord Jesus Christ. When every other authority has been dethroned, His remains an authority which in claiming our whole allegiance sets us free, which in turning us towards himself gives us the light by which we can explore his whole creation, which in honouring our responsibility yet takes our destiny into his own strong hands. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" I can only answer with an echo of those words of Peter: "Lord Jesus, we know and have believed that you are the Holy One of God."

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