



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



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Those of you who have children will be all too familiar with the oft-used phrase, “I don’t know!” For example, you ask your child, “where is the remote for the television?” and even though they are sitting on it the answer you always get is “I don’t know!”

Who wrote on the wall? I don’t know! Who spilt the milk? I don’t know! Who cut the dogs hair? I don’t know! (scissors in hand!!)

Forgive me if I am being too general here – perhaps it is only my kids that give this answer – but I suspect not!! The reason that answer is given, is in an attempt to avoid having to admit to the truth. Sometimes the truth is incriminating, in other words by telling the truth you are often admitting liability to something and in doing so it is like dropping a noose around your own neck. Other times the truth is not admitted to because if you do then you are simply giving yourself more work to do or putting yourself out when really you couldn’t not be bothered. And let’s not be too hard on our children here – we as adults do it too! In

Mark today we get a wonderful example of Jesus turning the tables on the chief priests and forcing them into a metaphorical corner as they, in their hearts know the answer to the question but decide that the best way of handling answering it is not to answer it at all but to claim ignorance. Let’s look at our reading again:

²⁷They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ²⁸“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

²⁹Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ³⁰John’s baptism - was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!” ³¹They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ³²But if we say, ‘From men’...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) ³³So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

This is a curious reading since we start off with Jesus paying his third visit in, it would seem as many days back to Jerusalem. The first time was as he rode in on the colt, on the day we have called Palm Sunday, that day he went to the temple to see what was going on. The second time was when he returned a day later and cleared the temple as we thought about it last week. Now today in our reading we read of him once again returning to Jerusalem and once again going to the Temple.

As Jesus is walking in the temple courts he is approached by the chief priests. There are really only 2 initial stages to the encounter that takes place here between Jesus and the Chief priests. Although in fairness this is simply the first instalment in the dialogue between the two parties the ultimately leads to Jesus death. Back in verse 18 we read:

¹⁸The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

Firstly then, The question.

They asked Jesus “Where does your authority come from that allows you to do and say the things you are doing?”

In essence, they were not interested in the truth of the answer this was simply a baited trap for Jesus. They were not interested in theological discussion, they were not up for a long debate, all they wanted was to corner Jesus – forcing Him into saying something that they could use against him to enable them to make moves to have him killed.

There are still some people who do this today. There are people who would rather nit pick through scripture and bring up arguments about this or that rather than ask for answers that give them hope that Jesus died for them and that that God’s love for them is so wonderful that they can never fully take it in. There are still people who would rather attempt to try and discredit the historical Jesus over miniscule and insignificant matters rather than admit to themselves the amazing, wonderful and unrivalled fact that Jesus loved them enough to sacrifice his life for them. It is almost as if they are looking for the small legal loophole that will allow them to dismiss Jesus’ claim on their lives.

If this is you – please stop trying to find a way of intelligently or academically disproving or discrediting Jesus’ love for you. Surrender to the amazing person he was and is and allow him to love you in a way you cannot begin to believe. We need to understand that Jesus was an amazing person. Historian Philip Schaff described the overwhelming influence which Jesus had on subsequent history and culture of the world: “This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science...he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.”

I can understand to a certain extent why the chief priest came to Him and asked Him where he got the authority to do what he was doing. They were in a power struggle with him in their own hearts and minds and they were bringing out the dirty tricks tactics to ensure victory. We have the blessing of hindsight. But surely knowing what we know now, how can we possibly ignore the person of Jesus Christ – it would be easier to ignore the nose on our face than to decide we don’t want to deal with Jesus!

What question are you asking of Jesus this week that you want an answer to but haven’t received it yet and because your answer has not been answered by God, you are therefore deciding to act or profess that God doesn’t exist or that Jesus was not God’s son! God’s existence is not dependant upon our confession, he does exist or not exist simply because we can or cannot confess our faith in him. God is God, Jesus was the incarnate Son of God and presently is sitting on the right hand side of God in Glory and this is a fact that does not need the oxygen of our belief for it to be real.

In Lee Strobel’s brilliant book, “The case for Christ.” He quotes William Lane Craig saying of Jesus, “Here is a man who thought of himself as the son of God in a unique sense, who

claimed to act and speak with divine authority, who held himself to be a worker of miracles, and who believed that people's eternal destiny hinged on whether or not they believed in Him." God's future existence does not depend on our belief in him but rather our eternal existence depends upon this belief!!

As stated in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the recipients of our witness to Jesus Christ as the Son of God are given three options as to their response. Professor Kirke responds to the skepticism of Lucy's siblings about her report of travelling to Narnia: "There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn't tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad. For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth" (LWW, p. 45).

Similar to Lucy's siblings, people who are confronted with the claims of Jesus Christ must initially make a decision about the one by whom the presentation is made. They are either promoting a deception, suffering from delusion or living a life of devotion to Christ. This is what you must decide about me this morning and about anyone else who would tell you that Jesus is the son of God. But you know it doesn't really matter what you think of me or anyone else who would talk to you about Jesus - what you must decide for yourself is who was Jesus really?

The question then: By what authority are you doing these things?"

Then secondly the answer.

Jesus decides instead of simply answering their question straight away, he would answer it with a question of his own. Now we need to note that Jesus wasn't simply being awkward for awkwardness sake, but there was a very real reason why he decided to do this. I believe that God will not give us any fresh revelations or understanding of who he is to us, until we are prepared to accept what he has already given to us. We cannot afford to eat more food until we have swallowed what is already in our mouth.

These Chief priests had not dealt properly with the issue and person of John the Baptist and so Jesus was more or less saying, "Look, I cannot tell you whose authority I use to do this until you accept and understand who the one who came before me was.

In the same way we cannot hope to understand anymore about God's nature, being and love until we have dealt with and accepted what he has already revealed to us in Jesus Christ and his written word.

²⁹Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ³⁰John's baptism - was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" ³¹They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' ³²But if we say, 'From men'..." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) ³³So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

They had two options here – one, they said that John's authority came from Heaven. If they do this then they are shooting themselves in the foot because back in John chapter one we read of them refusing to accept that what John was doing was from God. And if they were to admit it was from God then they risked being accused of not obeying God, and not doing what they should have done. If however they were to say that what John did was not from God then they ran the risk of the people turning against them since the

crowd still believed that John was God's messenger. They sacrificed truth on the alter of public opinion.

Sometimes truth has consequences that are unpleasant. Sometimes telling the truth can get us into trouble. Sometimes stating the truth can lose us support. One of the greatest dangers a minister has is not saying what God has laid upon his heart to say because he is afraid that in saying it he will lose the support of his congregation. The temptation, and listen, it is a very real temptation, is not to rock the boat since a smooth sailing suits everyone.

Please believe me when I say this, it is a real temptation. There are times when I would rather not preach on a certain topic or mention a certain truth revealed from scripture but to do so would be disobeying God. You need to be sure that anything that you hear from me during my sermons, has been given to me after prayer and much soul searching. Many of the things I say are not what I would choose to say if I had any sense but what I do say, I say in love because though I might not know to whom I am actually speaking to, God knows and God want you to listen.

Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:

²Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. ³For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

But be careful - this does not just apply to pastors and teachers, it applies to everyone who would confess the name of Jesus Christ. It applies in the shop, in the office, in classroom, in the coffee shop, in the home and you feel free to add to this list your place of witness for Jesus. We are all bound to speak the truth for Christ wherever he would place us and be assured that here in Northern Ireland, at the moment, it is 1000 times easier than it is in countries like, Vietnam, China, Colombia and many others. There they do it without counting the cost, here we do it with our calculations beforehand and if the cost is to high we join with the chief priests and claim, "We don't know..."

If we fail to acknowledge Jesus before men, Jesus himself gives us a stark and fearful warning in Matthew 10:32

³²"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. ³³But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

Two things we need to remember this morning:

- 1) The we cannot afford to not acknowledge to ourselves who Jesus really is
- 2) We cannot afford not to acknowledge to others who Jesus really is

C.S. Lewis in "Mere Christianity" said about Jesus,

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up

for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.”

Let us pray