

AUTHORITY IN THE GOSPEL

By JOHN ASHTON

JESUS WAS NOT the first Jew to feel uncomfortable about the idea of kingship; to many of his fellow-countrymen before him, the suggestion that monarchical authority should be vested in any other than Yahweh, the king of heaven, seemed distasteful, preposterous even, to the point of blasphemy.¹ One of the two parallel strands in the account of how Israel originally acquired a king is bitterly, almost vindictively, anti-monarchical. When Samuel prays to Yahweh about the people's request for a king, he is met with the reply: 'They have rejected me from being king over them';² and this is followed by a gloomy and not too inaccurate prediction of how a human king would be likely to behave. Of course, once the monarchy had been established, this traditional opposition to the notion of human kingship became muted, if not stifled; and as early as the time of David, monarchical authority was accepted in principle by a court-prophet like Nathan, even though his own presence as a recognized spokesman of Yahweh represented a decided limitation upon the king's authority and power.

The tension between Church and state, which we are accustomed to regard as belonging exclusively to 'the post-constantinian era', was thus present right from the start of the israelite monarchy. And it is worth recalling that it formed an integral part of the cultural complex in which the messianic tradition took shape: being reflected, in fact, in the very first stage of that tradition, the wonderful prophecy of Nathan to David.³ The greatest of the prophets showed a sturdy independence of the court and a healthy cynicism about its modes of operation; but as time wore on, other prophets emerged, professional prophets, servile and obsequious, prepared to identify the plans of the monarch with the will of God, like the

¹ This is an adapted version of an article first published in French (Ashton, J., S.J.: 'Exigences de la vérité'), in *Christus*, 65 (1970), pp 45-58). Some of the ideas are borrowed from a lecture by Fr Robert Murray S.J., 'Authority and the Spirit in the New Testament', published in *Authority in a changing Church* (London, 1968), pp 12-38.

² 1 Sam 8, 7.

³ 2 Sam 7.

four hundred prophets in the reign of Ahab who, when consulted by the king, gave whatever reply they thought would please him. Ahab admitted that there was another prophet he could approach, Micaiah the son of Imlah; 'but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil'.⁴ Subsequently, Jeremiah was to earn the hatred of Jehoiakin for identical reasons.

At no time was there any lack of so-called 'men of God' prepared to cut the cloth of prophecy to suit the policies of king or government. It is the temptation that inevitably besets any established Church, protected by the state, or simply unmolested by it. There is no shortage of modern examples.

After the return from exile there was little eagerness to restore the monarchy in its primitive form. An exilic prophet whom we know as second Isaiah had already triumphantly proclaimed the advent of a new king, and Sion itself, the city of king David, was to take up the cry and announce to the other cities of Judah, 'Behold your God! Behold the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him'.⁵ With his arm to rule for him, Yahweh no longer required the services of a human king; and the kingship of God, a concept which, though implicit in the ancient covenant tradition, had been blocked from view by the monarchy, came into its own again. It first became the theme of the new song, so often mentioned in the psalms of this period; and then, in an odd, apocalyptic dress, furnished the central argument of the teaching of Jesus, who, like John the Baptist, began his public ministry by proclaiming the imminent arrival of the reign of God.

This sketch of the history of the tension between human and divine kingship in Israel and Judah, however brief and inadequate, helps us to see some of the factors underlying Jesus' attitude to the messianic expectations of his contemporaries. Early on in the monarchical period, hopes were still very high, based as they were upon the extraordinary promise conveyed to king David by the prophet Nathan. But successive disappointments had blunted the edge of this prophecy, so that the figure of the future messiah gradually became more shadowy and insubstantial. At Qumran, significantly enough, two messiahs seem to have been awaited, one royal and one priestly; and other traditions of late Jewish apocalyptic literature identified the messiah with Moses, Elijah, and even the Son of man.

⁴ 1 Kg 22,8.

⁵ Isai 40, 9-10.

In the New Testament, the messiah is first and foremost a royal personage; and this fact goes a long way towards explaining Jesus' manifest reluctance to claim or even to accept the title except with considerable reservations. His authority was derived not from his own person but from his Father in heaven, and he had no wish to arrogate a personal power based upon a title or position of royalty. The gospel tradition represents him as welcoming Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, and as actually claiming the title of messiah at his trial before the Sanhedrin; but he always showed himself averse to hearing himself acclaimed as the messiah by the general populace. Many explanations have been offered of the 'messianic secret'; but at least one of its sources was surely the tension between Jesus' desire to win a large following and his unwillingness to base his popularity upon a reputation as a wonder-worker or a political leader. This tension, which originated, as we have seen, in a centuries-old uneasiness with the whole idea of human kingship, is dramatically illustrated by the temptation-narratives. To employ his special and peculiar powers simply to satisfy his own hunger, either for food or for self-aggrandisement, this temptation was relatively easy to resist. But the temptation to dazzle men into belief, to perform 'signs' of such power and brilliance as to leave them no option, as it were, but faith: this was a temptation which was with him all his life, right up to his death on Calvary. 'Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe'.⁶

Immediately after Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, the incident which constitutes a turning-point in the synoptic gospels, especially Mark, the evangelists go on to record the first prediction of the passion. Just how little Peter had really understood of the title he had just proclaimed in such ringing tones is betrayed by the violence of his reaction to the prospect thus afforded him of his master's future sufferings. And Jesus' own response, whose authenticity is assured by its very strangeness and harshness, shows that he associated Peter's reaction with his own central temptation: to take the easy road into men's hearts and to avoid what subsequent christian writers were to call, paradoxically but rightly, 'the royal road of the cross'.

The cross was to be the final solution of a problem which confronted Jesus throughout his ministry: how to elicit faith without

⁶ Mk 15,32.

coercion and without guile. It was, he came to see, the only possible way of winning men over honestly: it became one of the dominant themes of his preaching, and stiffened all the rest, giving them that unmistakable and characteristic christian toughness which was recognized by St Paul as the very stuff of the gospel message. But it was not the first solution to the question how Jesus should get his message across: it came to him, probably slowly, certainly painfully, as the result of a reflection upon the nature of his message and the quality of its reception, and also, no doubt, upon the real meaning of the scriptural tradition which he had inherited and which he felt called upon to fulfil.

So Jesus' own first problem was in a real sense the problem of authority, not the authority of his person but of his message. And the first solution, which he might initially have hoped would prove sufficient, was twofold: it lay both in the quality of the message and the quality of the messenger. It is no accident and no irrelevance that the response of Jesus' hearers to his message was astonishment at his *authority*, his *exousia*;⁷ nor is it enough to ascribe this response simply to the moral authority with which he spoke. Obviously, Jesus' personal impact must have been very great; but it is what he said as much as how he said it that won him his disciples and eventually cost him his life. The rich young man who 'went away sorrowful' was attracted both by Jesus' personality and by his words; but the invitation held out to him was too radical and too austere for him to accept.

For those who could and did accept the challenge contained in the proclamation of the kingdom, Jesus spoke to the heart as no other man had before or has since. Even those who feel unable to accept the full paradox of his teaching acknowledge the force and beauty of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you'; 'be ye perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'. The impossibility of these demands does nothing to detract from their urgency and power. Indeed, it is hard to think of them spoken hesitantly or tentatively. Much authority both within and without the Church has lost its assurance nowadays, and it is arguable that in many cases this is no bad thing. But the essential demands of Christ, which are the same today as in first-century Palestine, are not requests or suggestions: they are never prefaced by 'if you think it best', only by 'he who has ears to hear, let him

⁷ Mk 1, 22,27; 2,10; 9,8; 11,28.

hear'. There can be no compromise in the demand for obedience to the divine commands, no conditions harnessed to the expression of assent.

Clearly, only a man very close to God and confident that he spoke with divine authority could ever have been so absolute in his demands; and in fact the biblical background to the word *exousia* implies a divine commission and authorization which is also power. Heinrich Schlier, commenting on the word *Amen* in Kittel's *Wörterbuch*, argues that 'In the *Amen* before the *I say to you* of Jesus, the whole of christology is contained *in nuce*'; and his thesis has subsequently been taken over and expanded by Gerhard Ebeling. And if, in pondering the manner and content of Jesus' utterances, we find ourselves constantly compelled to move from the message to the messenger, indeed often unable clearly to distinguish between the two, then we are only following, probably rather fumblingly and, as it were, from a distance, an insight seized and unremittingly pursued by St John. By one of those sublime leaps of imaginative intuition that belong to genius, he grasped the essential truth that Jesus was the object of his own message; the proclaimed and the proclaimer were one: 'I am the way, I am truth and life'. How shallow and imperceptive, when all is said and done, is Harnack's observation that 'the gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son'.

Nevertheless, Jesus' message derived its force from his obedience to the Father's will, not from a personal authority that could set itself up as self-authenticating and autonomous. St John saw this too: 'I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me'.⁸ In this short sentence is found compressed the most profound teaching concerning the nature of christian authority: it issues from a total and unquestioning obedience to the will of God. Moreover, this dependence is not just a relationship that can be once acknowledged and then forgotten. Jesus himself found it necessary to turn constantly to his Father, who occupies the central place in his parables and is the author of all his moral demands. For the christian to think that he can act otherwise is the height of folly, particularly so in the case of the leaders of the Church, who unconsciously arrogate to themselves titles and functions that belong to God alone. Such procedures

⁸ Jn 5,30; cf 14,10.

exhibit, no doubt, a monumental misunderstanding of Christ's teaching, and indeed of the Incarnation itself. For all that, they appear to have manifested themselves at a very early date, since the gospel warns us against them in a passage which probably originated in the early palestinian community of christians:

The scribes and the pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practise and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practise. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.⁹

Except for the opening lines, this passage has received surprisingly little attention from christian commentators. Hans Urs von Balthasar has observed that when the titles mentioned here, and others like them such as 'Lord', 'Eminence', 'Excellency' are claimed as of right, as they continue to be even today by catholic priests, in open defiance of the express command of the gospels, then they conceal the essential function of the priesthood, which is that of service, and fail to allow Christ to be perceived, as he should be, in and through their ministry.

This usurpation of divine authority is bad enough in the individual priest who uses the shepherd's staff as a crutch to lean on or, worse still, as a stick with which to beat those who offend or irritate him. But the history of the Church is littered with examples of an infinitely more noxious phenomenon, one we touched upon in our introduction: the comparison, the equation, and sometimes even the identification of the authority of the Church with that of civil society. Think of all the aberrations arising out of Augustine's theory of the two cities; the medieval doctrine of the two swords; Bellarmine's argument that the Church, like the state, is a 'perfect society'; Bossuet's attempt to integrate political and religious living

⁹ Mt 23, 2-12.

within a single, all-embracing framework; think finally of the byzantine theology represented by Pseudo-Dionysius and of the thesis sustained for so many centuries that the policies of the emperor, the Lord's anointed, were by definition the policies of God. The stately ritual of High Mass is still with us to remind us of modern christendom's dependence upon the byzantine court; and who would dare say that this harmless survival is the only remaining relic of the constantinian era, when at the Synod only last year, two portuguese bishops openly defended Portugal's policy of oppressive colonialism in Angola and Mozambique?

What, then, are we to say of the New Testament texts so often used to bolster up civil authority and to deny that civil disobedience can ever be justified? 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' is perhaps the best known of these texts, but St Paul frequently, and especially in the notorious passage in Romans,¹⁰ betrays an anxiety that christians should, as far as possible, keep in good odour with the local authorities. And the first letter of Peter is even more emphatic: 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right'.¹¹ It is argued that Jesus' first act, even before he was born, was an act of submission to a roman decree, and that in accepting the cross he never questioned the authority of Pilate. But the plain fact is that neither Christ nor his immediate followers betrayed much interest in the nature of political power as such: they accepted it as part of life, but showed themselves quite ready to stand up to it when any principle, moral or religious, was at stake. There was never any suggestion that civil authority was sacrosanct.

A greater problem, of course, is the nature of ecclesiastical authority, the power of binding and loosing, and the admission that even the scribes and the pharisees had the right to dictate a code of behaviour to others. But Jesus never *commended* the scribes and pharisees; and as for the nature of authority within the Church, it must be stated emphatically that it never formed part of the gospel. Man is so constituted that he must live in society, and no organized religion can survive without institutional structures and a code of law. But neither the structures nor the law belonged to the good news: a fundamental feature of the new covenant, which is the most important element in the institution of the new people of God,

¹⁰ Rom 13, 1-7.

¹¹ 1 Pet 2, 13ff.

was its insistence that obedience to the law was now no longer a prerequisite, but an object inherent in the promise. The real authority is within.

The key to the christian conception of authority is to be found at the end of the passage from St Matthew's gospel which we have already quoted. No doubt the idea of authority as service is open to all sorts of abuses, notably that curious inversion which consists in regarding the exercise of supreme power as itself the supreme service, a thesis which found its first and most remarkable theoretical champion in Thomas Hobbes. And as long as the authority of the Church is conceived along political lines, there will always be the risk of a kind of ecclesiastical fascism. But the sort of service Christ expected of his disciples has nothing to do with political theories of any kind:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'.¹²

Thus with a single devastating disjunction, Jesus brushes aside all notions of wordly dominion as totally irreconcilable with his own demand for loving service. Jesus' essential service was to offer his life on the cross for the redemption of mankind. By the time these words were spoken he had perceived that it was inevitable, indeed desirable, for him to suffer death. Only in this way could he fulfil the will of his Father, only in this way could he convince the world of the extent of his Father's love, '... that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should have eternal life'.¹³ And the authority his sacrifice wins him is, in the end, the only authority worth the name: it is the authority of love, not the selfish love that remains restless and unsatisfied until it has compelled a response, but the pure love that insists above all else on the freedom of the response it wishes to elicit.

In Luke's adaptation of this passage, we find what could be the source of the famous scene of the washing of feet in St John: 'The kings of the gentiles lord it over them ... But not so with you ... For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves?'

¹² Mk 10, 42-45.

¹³ Jn 3,16.

Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves'.¹⁴

The service is now symbolized by the function of waiting at table, and Luke is content to allow the full meaning of the symbol to be indicated by the context in which the words are spoken, the conclusion of the Last Supper, which looks forward to the Passion.

John seizes upon the symbol and develops it into a story, inserting at the same time an unmistakable reference to Jesus' death: 'having loved those who were in the world, he loved them to the end'.¹⁵ In his love, he calls them, 'not servants, but friends', and precisely because he has called them friends, not just treating them as equals but appealing for their love, he can demand the service which his words seem to renounce. But this service is only possible for those who love: 'if you love me you will keep my commandments',¹⁶ for the command itself is one of love: 'that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another'.¹⁷ The transformation of authority is complete: it would seem that within the christian community the man who serves his brethren with the most whole-hearted devotion is the one who, like Christ, is entitled to ask for their own service in return. Unreal idealism? Perhaps. But an ideal to which the christian community could approximate much more closely than in the past. The allegory of the good shepherd makes the point even more clearly: 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'.¹⁸ Short of the supreme love that makes the shepherd ready, if necessary, to suffer death on behalf of his sheep, there is no authority in the christian sense. Not that we should attribute to the spiritual leaders of the Church a role too closely resembling that of the supreme shepherd (as has been done far too readily and unthinkingly in the past), but the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and his flock is perhaps some sort of model, notwithstanding.

The last passage in St John that I wish to consider is the trial before Pilate, where Jesus accepts, for the first and only time, the title of king, in circumstances that completely rule out the sort of facile interpretation he dreaded. St John has already set in strong relief two important aspects of Christ's authority: first, what we may call the vertical aspect of total derivation from the Father, and secondly, the horizontal aspect of service to the community of

¹⁴ Lk 22,25-27.

¹⁷ Jn 13,34.

¹⁵ Jn 13,1.

¹⁸ Jn 10,11.

¹⁶ Jn 14,5.

friends. Now he builds upon the traditional scene of the roman trial in such a way as to establish quite conclusively the nature of his kingship, which, as Jesus asserts to a bewildered Pilate, 'is not of this world'. Accepting the title of king, but not the meaning Pilate gave to it, he goes on: 'For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice'.¹⁹

Christ's authority is the authority of truth, which has an absolute claim on man, made as he is to know the truth and able to belong to it in some curious way, even before he has fully accepted the message of Christ. In St John's theology, Christ is himself the truth, that is to say he is identified, as we have seen, with his own revelation. No right-thinking man can refuse to respond to this revelation, provided that it is presented to him whole and undistorted: 'Every one who is of the truth hears my voice'. And this is the way – the only way – in which Christ reigns: this is the secret of his kingship.

And the christian's authority is no other. Like that of Jesus himself it is derived from the Father; it is *his* truth and *his* goodness and *his* love which find expression in the incarnation of the Son of God. The purpose of the Incarnation is to reveal this goodness and love to man: 'For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth'. And the authority of the christian is really that of the apostle, at the service of the word: 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you'.²⁰ Those who are sent carry with them the Spirit of truth and are invested with the power to communicate this Spirit to others, just as Christ has communicated it to them. In fact there are not two 'missions', but only one, since, in accepting from their mouth the Spirit of truth, future converts to christianity will be listening to the voice of Christ.

The paradigm case of the apostle, the missionary entrusted with the message of reconciliation, is St Paul. As we know, he had at first thought of commending this message to the corinthians by a display of 'lofty words and wisdom' (the intellectual's form of the temptation that confronted Christ on the pinnacle of the temple).²¹ And if, as is possible, he did in fact yield to this temptation at Athens, he soon became aware that this kind of preaching, resting on personal prestige and authority, could not win for Christ the sort of loyal allegiance he sought. So it was that his speech and his message to the corinthians 'were not in plausible words of wisdom,

¹⁹ Jn 18,37.

²⁰ Jn 20, 21.

²¹ I Cor 2,1.

but in the demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God'.²² (The Spirit, of course, *is* the power of God – power being a word Paul is not afraid of using in this context; and the power of God has been identified earlier with 'the word of the cross'.²³) Later, reflecting on the nature of his mission as an apostle, he made a further statement of policy: 'We have renounced disgraceful, underhand ways; we refuse to practise cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God'.²⁴ The truth must be allowed to make its own appeal to the free human conscience, and the job of the apostle is to ensure that the voice of Christ is not muffled by his own claims to prestige and privilege, and the cross of Christ not overshadowed by his own posturings. Hence the severe warnings to those in authority in the pastoral epistles.²⁵ It is easy for the servant to dress up in the robes of authority, and so stifle the Spirit,²⁶ and deprive the message of its true power ...

... but man, proud man
 Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As make the angels weep ...²⁷

Whoever exercises authority in the Church – and every preacher is invested with the authority of the word – must be prepared to lay aside his garment and play the part of a servant. This will rarely mean death, but it will always mean the cross.

²² 1 Cor 2,4.

²³ 1 Cor 1, 18.

²⁴ 2 Cor 4, 2.

²⁵ Acts 20, 28; 1 Pet 5, 1-3.

²⁶ Cf 1 Thess 5, 19.

²⁷ Shakespeare: *Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene II, ll 117-21.