

‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ A demand made by the Temple authorities to Peter and the disciples when they are brought before them following the healing of a lame man in the Temple precincts and Peter’s subsequent preaching to the crowd who had gathered. The same question had been asked of Jesus when he had taught in the Temple.

‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ There is with that the underlying question, ‘Who do you think you are? Why are you doing this?’ It is an age old question asked by those in authority, wary of challenges to their authority, wary of demands for change. Many of the crucial changes in the Church have occurred as authority has been challenged. The Reformation itself arose out of such a challenge as did the separation of the Methodists from the Church of England. The ordination of women, the development of new liturgies, new hymns – all these have arisen as groups within the Church have expressed a dissatisfaction and changes, new structures, new ways of doing things, fresh expressions of faith (many now taken for granted) have come about. The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, from which we have been reading as our first lesson on these Sundays after Easter, is a story of change, fundamental change, as the infant Church emerges from the Judaism of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jerusalem and out into the wider world.

“Who do you think you are? Why are you doing these things?” For the disciples, the answer to these questions lay in their experience of Jesus of Nazareth, their experience of him teaching and healing, their experience of his risen presence with them in the aftermath of Calvary. Whatever way we interpret these things, one thing cannot be denied, what began in Jerusalem in the events that followed Calvary was very quickly to spread right across the Roman Empire, to transform human civilisation.

“Who do you think you are? Why are you doing these things?” At the heart of the answer to these questions, both for the disciples and for ourselves in our own day lies the person of Jesus of Nazareth, his life and teaching, his continued presence among us. Our very understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, our fundamental vocation as that of presenting Christ, being Christ, in and for the word of today; being the hands, the feet, the lips, the eyes of Christ in the world in which we are set, in our schools, our places of work and recreation, our homes and communities.

In our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson set for today, the writer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John explores how this is expressed in daily living. At the heart of our Christian life, both as an individual and as a community lies a two fold commitment:

<sup>23</sup>And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

A commitment of faith and a commitment of love. A commitment of faith that has, as an essential and inseparable outworking, a commitment of love to our neighbour. The faith empowers the love and, without that love, the faith is empty. John leaves us in no doubt as to the love that we are called to show.

<sup>17</sup>How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

<sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Let us love in truth and in action. This is a love that goes beyond words, a love that touches the wounds of a hurting and broken world. My mind turned to the Prayer of St Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.

This is a love that is expressed not just in word but in truth and in action. This is love that turns the other cheek, that goes the second mile, that offers the tunic when asked for the cloak. It is a love that speaks the word of truth in the face of injustice, hope in the face of despair, of reconciliation in situations of conflict. In doing all this we not only seek to follow the teachings of Christ but also adopt something of the manner of Christ, as one

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, .....

And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself

And so St Francis' Prayer continues:

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

“Who do you think you are? Why are you doing these things?”

We are members of the Body of Christ, called to model in our own life and witness the love of God in Christ in the world of today. May God enable each one of us to be faithful instruments of his love in whatever situation, among whatever people, he places us this week; that whatever we say, whatever we think, whatever we do may be as in his sight and in his service.