

The Authority of Christ

by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 22nd April 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Acts 4:1-22**¹; John 10:11-18
(Revised Common Lectionary Year B, 4th Sunday of Easter)

Introduction: What's your attitude to authority?

I guess those of us who, like me, have been brought up in comfortable, middle-class homes in this country, have been taught to respect authority: listen to your parents, obey teachers at school, respect the police and the rule of law. We've been taught, either explicitly or implicitly, that rules are there to keep everyone safe. The law is on the side of justice, and even if abuse of authority occurs, the law provides a way of seeking redress, even against officials and Government departments. We are led to believe that people from the "Windrush generation" who were denied jobs or medical treatment will be compensated. Teachers, youth leaders, priests and others who have abused children, even decades ago, will be brought to book.

But what if the law is used to enforce injustice and deny people their rights? What if your freedom to follow your faith and express your beliefs is curtailed? Suppose you have to choose between your conscience and following the law? What then?

The story of Hea-Woo

A few weeks ago several of us from this church were at Spring Harvest, a Christian conference in Minehead. One of the guest speakers was a lady from North Korea named Hea-Woo. Listen to part of her remarkable story.²

Hea-Woo's life has been full of trauma. In 1997, in the midst of a great famine in North Korea, Hea-Woo's daughter in her mid-twenties starved to death in her own home. Hea-Woo's husband escaped to China. He found God...but sadly he was caught by the secret police and six months later died in a North Korean prison camp. Hea-Woo said, "I was shocked to hear that my husband had become a Christian but instinctively I knew he had found the truth."

It wasn't too long after this that Hea-Woo herself escaped to China and became a Christian through a series of events similar to those that had influenced her husband's journey to faith. She was then caught by the secret police, repatriated to North Korea and placed in a prison camp. She shares about the horrors of life in these prisons: death so rampant that bodies would lie on the ground for three or four days without being cleaned up; mental and physical abuse that would make you sick in the pit of your stomach. Every day was torture.

And yet, in one of the darkest places on earth, Hea-Woo started to tell her fellow prisoners about Jesus. And so, right there in the middle of a North Korean labour camp, a secret fellowship church began.

In her words: "The Bible verses that I'd recall from memory gave the others hope. They also saw the Spirit at work in me. I stood out among the other prisoners because I helped them. Sometimes I shared my rice with the sick. Occasionally I washed their clothes, too.

"God used me to lead five people to faith. I tried to teach them the little I knew about Jesus. I didn't have access to a Bible in the camp. But on Sundays and at Christmas, we met together out

¹ The lectionary has only verses 5-12

² Taken from <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/videos/radical-dangerous-life-hea-woo-north-korea/> accessed 21 April 2018

of the view of the guards. Usually, that was in the toilet. There we held a short service. I taught them the Bible verses and songs that I knew. We sang almost inaudibly so that no one would hear us.”

The persecuted Church

The persecution suffered by Christian believers in North Korea is as bad as any suffered by the church in its 2000-year history. Similar experiences were recorded by Christians in Communist countries during the Soviet era, and are happening today in China and in some Muslim countries.

What is it that keeps believers going in the face of such opposition? Some are strengthened by the knowledge that Christ himself suffered for them at the hands of the authorities for speaking the truth about God and challenging injustice. In adversity they draw near to God and receive the strength of his Holy Spirit. The Bible is another great source of strength, even if they have no bible of their own and must rely on remembered verses. Furthermore, Jesus’ resurrection and promise of eternal life reminds them that even if they are killed for their faith, they are safe in God’s hands eternally. Finally, knowing that their Christian brothers and sisters in other lands are praying for them is also a great source of strength. We who live and worship without fear of arrest and punishment for our faith need to be faithful in prayer for those who suffer persecution.

The Jerusalem Church

Our reading from Acts gives us an insight into the opposition faced by Jesus’ first disciples. The very authorities who had arrested Jesus and had him put to death were now clamping down on their freedom to speak about him and share the gospel of his death and resurrection. The earlier part of the story sees Peter and John healing a crippled man and then proclaiming to the gathered crowd that the healing has taken place in the name of Jesus and by his power.

As chapter 4 begins, the Jewish authorities arrest Peter and John and on the next day bring them before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin. They are amazed at the boldness of Peter and John, men without formal education and yet able to quote the Jewish scriptures and show how they had been fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Unable to deny the fact of the healing, they decide to warn them sternly not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus.

I would be very proud to have given the response that Peter gives to the chief priests and leaders:

‘Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.’ (Acts 4:19-20, NRSV)

Of course, we’ve been told earlier (4:8) that Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit. You may remember Jesus’ promise to his followers that when they are hauled up in front of rulers and authorities to give account of themselves, the Holy Spirit would give them the words to speak.

The issue of authority

Peter’s words get to the heart of the issue: to whose authority should we give allegiance? The New Testament instructs Christians to respect and obey the governing authorities; but where there is a conflict between the authority of human institutions and the authority of God, we need to be clear which comes first for us as followers of Jesus.

The name of Jesus

I wonder if you noticed the repeated use in our passage of the phrase “the name of Jesus”? The apostles are instructed not to speak in the name of Jesus. But in chapter 3, Peter told the crowd that the crippled man had been healed in the name of Jesus. In chapter 4 he tells the Jewish leaders that “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (4:12). As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to pray in his name, go in his name, speak in his

name and act in his name. This means going, speaking and acting on behalf of Jesus – we are his representatives and his agents in the world.

It also means that we pray, go, speak and act with his authority. When Jesus cleared the money-changers and traders out of the Temple, the chief priests asked by what authority he had done this. In today's Gospel reading from John, Jesus says that he has power to lay down his life and power to take it back again. The Greek word translated "power" is *exousia*, which actually means authority. This is the word used at the end of Matthew's gospel, when Jesus commissions his disciples to spread the good news,

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV)

The picture of the church we get in the book of Acts is of Christians who are serious about living out their faith in Jesus, sharing their possessions with those in need, helping the sick and fearlessly speaking about Jesus to others. Their first allegiance was to Jesus Christ, and all that they did was to be in his name and by his authority.

Living under the authority of Christ

Today there are many sources of authority that claim our allegiance. The State has laws about how we should behave, a principle which is endorsed in the Bible, as we have seen. But when those laws begin to encroach on our right to express our Christian beliefs and values, whose authority will we bow to?

Another source of authority that is popularly followed in our culture is the cult of self-fulfilment. If it feels right to you, do it. If it makes you feel fulfilled, follow it. You can do whatever you want, be whatever you want, and no one has the right to say otherwise. Follow your dream! Although this ideology claims to be the key to personal well-being, it would be better described as a licence for hedonism and self-centredness. It's worshipping the idol of the ego. When Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he replies "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Luke 4:8, NRSV).

Another false authority is the ideology of political correctness. Recently the laws in England, Wales and Scotland changed, enabling people to marry someone of the same sex. It is not against the law to continue to *believe* that marriage should be between a man and a woman, but what will people think of you if you openly espouse that view in a conversation among friends, or in your workplace – however respectfully you do so? And what about the latest measure of political correctness – the view that anyone can change their gender, and that to disagree with any aspect of transgenderism makes you guilty of "hate speech"? Is it "transphobic" to question the wisdom of telling young boys that they can become girls, or young girls that they can become boys?

Universities should be places where students can explore and debate a variety of ideas. But there have been a number of worrying cases recently of university student unions banning student groups or speakers who challenge the politically correct agenda on marriage, transgender issues or abortion. These are all complex issues that need thoughtful, informed and open debate. As Christians, we have a wonderful framework of scripture and Christian tradition to inform our understanding of the moral and pastoral aspects of these matters. Let us not be afraid to engage with these issues with openness, humility and compassion, seeking to bring the authority of God's word to bear on the complexities of human experience, and not just following the crowd.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this sermon I told the story of one North Korean Christian who was bold enough not only to keep her faith in the face of terrible persecution, but to share it with others, bringing them hope and meaning. Christians are persecuted in North Korea because they dare to believe that there is a higher authority than that of Kim Jong Un. They hold onto the faith that the religion of Jesus Christ is better than the ideology of the State.

The first disciples of Jesus also found that their allegiance to Jesus Christ brought them into conflict with the ruling authorities. They had to make a decision whether to obey what they were told by human beings or what God wanted them to do.

I am so grateful that in our country we are legally allowed to practise our faith, and are not living in fear of being arrested, or having our bibles confiscated or our churches closed down.

But we should not be naïve about the very real forces in our country that challenge the authority of God's word, and threaten to steer us, perhaps very subtly and persuasively, to accept beliefs and values that have only the authority of human beings and the passing validity of current fashion.

We are called to live, work, pray, go, speak and act in the name of Jesus Christ, and under his authority. May he give us the boldness, and the wisdom of his Spirit, to live our lives in accordance with his will, and for the extension of his Kingdom.