

Epiphany 4
January 29, 2012
Rev. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Behind each reading this Sunday is the same unspoken question, contextualized in the situation of the faith community that each reading addresses. The readings are the answers.

Behind Deuteronomy the question asked was: “Who’s in charge? Who speaks as the official representative of God? Although the answer’s put into God’s mouth, it’s clear that the developing religious institution of early Judaism was running into problems with unofficial prophets, with “lone gunman” if you will – people claiming the authority of God to speak, but not having the institutional authority to back that up. Institutions respond badly when outsiders act and speak in ways that appear to usurp their authority. The Deuteronomist’s response is particularly violent, but not uncommon – both across the societies of the ancient world of the 7th Century B.C., when Deuteronomy was written, and across the ages via the 1st Century A.D. to our own time.

That was clearly an issue for those who heard Jesus. Their question was based on the Mediterranean Honor/Shame “limited good” culture. Limited good was a belief that there was only so much “good” in the world, and if an individual gained more than someone else lost. Kings and religious elites had power and authority, the poor, and artisans didn’t – if a lowly person or an artisan – say a carpenter – sought to exercise authority they would be seen as going against the culture’s self-understanding and would have been rejected. Hence the concern of Jesus listeners – where did he get the right to claim the authority he clearly was exercising over demons? He wasn’t authorized...he had no right..... Hence the question from today’s gospel: “How can a lowly carpenter be a vehicle for the power and authority of God?”

Remember the penalty the Deuteronomist identified for “false” prophets – for those, in other words, who spoke on behalf of God without official sanction? Death — which unsurprisingly turned out to be the penalty Jesus paid.....make claims to authority and you can make some pretty powerful enemies.....

In a more benign, non-violent way, Paul was seeking to address another authority question: “who gets to decide who can eat what?” Who has the authority? And who gave it to them.

There are some times in human history where the question of authority comes up in spades. Interestingly there are three particular times that are relevant to us today: firstly, and by no coincidence, the early 8th and late 7th Centuries B.C.; the 1st Century A.D., and today.

Yes, today we have that same question of the nature and extent of authority

Why does it come up? It seems to come up whenever humanity passes through periods of great social and cultural change. The times I mentioned – the 7-8th Centuries B.C., the 1st Century A.D., and today – all times of enormous cultural change. In the face of this dramatic, uncontrollable, disturbing change we always ask this basic question: “Where, in our time, do we find our authority?” This question of authority is The Question that gets raised in times of great

change and transition in human history

Where, in our time.....? The specific answer in each age is going to look and be different. The authority that worked in the time of the prophets, or of Jesus and the early church, are not necessarily going to be the form of authority that will work for us.

For that matter, the forms of authority that worked 40 years ago aren't going to work for us in our time. "Father (and I use that word to refer to our earthly fathers and also in the religious usage of "father=priest") "Father knows best" doesn't work anymore. Trust me! I know that! When Fr. Henkein, or Fr. Macrow (the two priests whom I grew up with) would say something in the 1950's or 1960's it carried unquestioned authority. Quite literally no one thought to challenge them, to question the authority that they as ordained persons, exercised.

Legally I have institutional authority conferred on me by virtue of my ordination – in sociological terms it would be called both "legal authority" and "traditional authority". The canons of the Church give me the authority to do pretty much anything I want with the liturgy, for instance – I could, if I wanted, say "forget the organ, let's rip it out and bring in a praise band!"

How do you feel about that?!! Not positive?!! That's because the way we understand authority has changed. Ultimately the sociologists will tell you that there are two forms of authority: personal authority and conferred or delegated authority. We all have some form of personal authority in different parts of our lives, but when it comes to those places beyond the individual – to communities – contemporary authority is conferred or delegated authority.

The problems come when those in authority forget that the authority they exercise is conferred, is delegated. Think of our governing institutions, for instance. They are struggling, today, to come to terms with the people rising up and telling them that we are really in charge, and they've not been using the authority we delegated to them properly.

What about the institution of the Church?. The message of the readings is that all authority is ultimately from God, and God confers that authority to human beings. We humans have developed the institutions that shape our common life as a way of exercising that authority in appropriate ways. In theological language that institutional authority is the Authority of the Baptized. You as part of the baptized have delegated, have given, some of the authority God has given you – given us – to individuals and groups who can better manage and exercise it. In institutional terms that would be myself and the vestry.

The baptismal covenant offers us this new understanding of authority: one sanctioned by the Institution but which undercuts old, hierarchical models of authority. The last 30 years have been about figuring out – with jumps and starts – what that new structure of authority looks like. It's a brave new world we're entering, isn't it?!! Where does the authority lie? With me? With you? With us?

What about with the bible? Some would say so – but if you can be executed for wearing linen, or playing football, what sort of authority's that?!! It's just not that simple to say "if the bible says it

then it must be the right way". Human intellect and reason, institutional traditions, have to be applied, and melded into the Gospel's vision of authority. That's why we as Episcopalians have what's called Richard Hooker's "three-legged stool": "scripture, tradition, reason" – a handy device for thinking about the sources of our guidance and the authority that exists within our faith community..

Next week we have our annual meeting. That is, I suppose, the epitome of institutional authority – an example of how we function. What you will hear – among the minutiae, and the reports – is our awareness that we live in this time of great change – change we can't keep up with – and that we know that questions of authority are lively, and current, and unsettled, and that we're trying to maintain an environment where we can have the sorts of conversations that can help us all to come to a better understanding of where our authority as a community of faith lies, and how we can exercise it for the benefit of all.

So my invitation to all of you is to think about where you find the authority in your lives as individuals, and how you see authority in a broader, community context, and then to engage in a conversation with all of us about what it looks like, and what it means for you, and for all of us.