

Authority in Religious Life

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Scripture: Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 7:7-12; 7:24-29.

Text: Matthew 7:29, "For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."²

The effect upon the multitude of this sermon of Jesus, the sermon on the Mount, at once arouses our interest. If there is one thing that men desire in any thought, in any deed, it is authority. Somehow that beautiful hymn of Cardinal Newman's, "Lead Kindly Light" touches a responsive chord in every heart. As we sit here today, looking into the unknown future, conscious that tomorrow with all its uncertainties is before us, conscious that it may bring into our life some great sorrow, some great temptation, some great defeat, something which may overcome us and cast [us] aside worn out and useless, we instinctively pray for some kindly light to lead us. We feel that deep down in our hearts there is a craving, a longing to cast the burden of responsibility upon the shoulders of another, and for one moment to feel certain, absolutely certain, that we are supported by and are under the immediate protection of a great power whose love and care for us ever assures us that that he is watching over us. With what resoluteness, and courage would you and I go about our daily tasks, if we were certain that we were supported by an infallible authority. Sometimes when I am called upon to make a personal decision which is of some importance to me, I feel, and I know that under similar conditions, you must feel, very much as the grand old Cardinal Newman did, when, after

¹ While this manuscript has no date, there is the notation, "(8)" at the top, similar to other notations from dated sermons from his Earl Davis' time as a student at Harvard. On the back of the last page is the location, Manchester, N. H., and "Hum. 2," which I believe refers to a class Earl Davis was taking at Harvard.

² The text from Matthew 7:29 is not written out in the manuscript, only its source, "Matthew 7:29"

years of unhappy search for an authority in his religious life, he turned to the protecting arms of the Catholic Church, singing out of the uncertainty of his soul:

Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on;
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene;
One step enough for me.³

At times we feel this same uncertainty in our religious life. We are not always quite certain about the great religious truths, which mean so much to us, truths which make life as we know [it] worthwhile. Could we but know absolutely that God is a loving Father, to whom we might go in prayer in moments of great joy, or great sorrow, upon whose guiding care we could always depend, how authoritatively would we express our religious belief, and with what faith would we live our religious life.

But these things we do not know, and it is because of this deep uncertainty in our hearts that we are so interested in this fact that Jesus taught his religious truths with such authority that the multitude was astonished. The thought occurs to us that perhaps we, too, may come to see the truth Jesus had seen, and be assured of the great religious insight which had enlightened his soul, and enabled him to feel the authority of a loving Father back of him, to show his authority to the multitude.

There is one thing that becomes quite apparent as one studies the life of Jesus as we know it. The authority with which he spoke was not some external authority derived from an oracle, or an inspired book, or an ecclesiastical functionary, but it was the authority of an internal conviction which filled his soul and dominated his mind. In fact, that is just what the text tells us most plainly. He did not teach as the scribes. The authority of the scribes was based upon just these external things. They depended upon the tradition of Jewish religious

³ Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) wrote this poem in 1834. Originally an evangelical academic at the University of Oxford, and a priest in the Church of England, he became dissatisfied with the Church of England and in 1845 left the Church of England and was received into the Catholic Church. Pope Leo XIII made him a Cardinal in 1879. He was Beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on September 19, 2010.

history, upon the ritual and forms of ceremony, habits and customs which had been ingrained into the very fiber of the Jewish race. All these external authorities came in to support the scribes in their teaching. What more could they ask for? If there is any lasting authority in these external forms, traditions, and institutions as such certainly there never was a more opportune time to use them, than in those years in the history of the Jewish people. But even with these authorities, the scribes could not reach the multitude as did the simple carpenter Jesus of Nazareth. Not known to the world, heralded only by the fanatic preacher, John the Baptist, this devoted consecrated soul comes before the multitude preaching a new Gospel, and he preaches it with such authority that the multitude is astonished. Why? Because his authority is not dependent upon some special revelation, as a divine institution, but it is the authority of an inner conviction. Could you and I feel the authority of a similar conviction at this moment, the world would become a new place for us, our doubts would be dispelled, and our uncertainties would vanish, and a deep peaceful faith would take possession upon mind and heart.

How much it would mean to us if we could go back of that day when Jesus first comes before the world to be baptized of John the Baptist in the Jordan, we can never know. If we but knew the story of his life as he grew from childhood into youth, and from youth into manhood, it might reveal to us truths of inestimable value in solving our perplexing questions. But all is a blank, save one little incident in the temple. At times in our imagination, we try to picture him standing by the carpenter's bench, doing his daily duties in his simple noble way. Even then we wish rather to know the thoughts that accompanied his mind, and the struggles that went on within his soul day-by-day as he grew up into manhood. But all these imaginings are in vain. We know him only as the teacher of the simple religious life among the people of Palestine. He comes to us first as a man among men, destined to lead and remold the religious life of the world. If we find the source of his authority, we must seek it among the records of his life and teachings.

A study of these sources reveals three facts, which I wish to suggest by noticing certain typical instances.

The first one is that Jesus was a very close observer of nature, and from this observation he derived many of his

religious truths. "Seek ye first his Kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you"⁴ says Jesus. And we wonder where any by what means that great truth had dawned upon his mind. Had it come to him by a strange supernatural revelation of God? Or did Jesus observe the truth in some more natural way? Our answer is found in the very passage which contains these wonderful words. Jesus says,

Behold the birds of the heaven that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and you heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value than they? ... And why are ye anxious concerning raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you."⁵

Then follows that beautiful teaching: "Seek ye first his Kingdom and his righteousness and food and raiment will take care of himself."⁶ Jesus had observed the life and habits of the birds of the heaven, had seen their carefree enjoyment of the day that is, and compared it with the overanxious stirrings of man for the indulgence of his mere physical wants. God cares for the birds of the air; will he not also care for man? Again, he had observed the beauty and the simplicity of the lily of the field, and he had compared it with man's vain attempts to adorn his person with costly raiment, and the comparison was to the credit of the natural beauty of the wildflower. Again, he thought, 'If God clothes the grass of the field with such beauty, will he not care for man.' "Seek ye first this Kingdom and his righteousness, and these things will be added unto you." These two allusions to life in nature are but typical of many

⁴ Matthew 6:33.

⁵ Matthew 6:26-30.

⁶ It is interesting how Earl Davis' Biblical quotations both differ slightly from the language of the King James Bible, and, in this instance, differ with each other. Here we have three versions of Matthew 6:33: (1) ECD#1: "Seek ye first his Kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you;" (2) ECD #2: "Seek ye first his Kingdom and his righteousness and food and raiment will take care of himself;" (3) King James: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

{??} bring home to us very forcibly the truth that Jesus was a keen observer of natural life, seeing there evidences of God's care for us, of God's eternal power, of God's love for truth, goodness + beauty. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto the man who sowed good seed in his field."⁷ "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed."⁸ "Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?"⁹ All these and many more tell us that Jesus gleaned many of his beautiful and noble thoughts by his close observation of nature. It is simply wonderful to see the extent to which Jesus' sayings indicate that many of his great truths are but products of the simple everyday habit of keen observation. Here a fact is noted, there a fact is noted. By and by these simple facts crystalize out into a beautiful truth, of value to men for all time, a source of inspiration and comfort to the human soul, and above all, true to all times and conditions because based upon the actual love of God as they were revealed to Jesus among the hills and valleys of Palestine.

If we turn to another aspect of Jesus' life and teaching, we discover another source of his truth. It is all crystalized in one little passage showing us as clearly and as plainly as if Jesus had told us with his own words that he studies the lives of his fellow men. Let me read the passage.

And he sat down over against the Treasury, and beheld how the multitude cast money into the Treasury, and many that were rich cast in much. And then came a poor widow and she cast in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples, and said unto them 'Verily I say unto you, This poor widow cast in more than all they that are casting into the Treasury; For they all did cast in of their superfluity; but she of her want did cast in all that she had even all her living.'¹⁰

What a picture? If we could but see in our imagination just what took place there and understand the significance of it as a principle of Jesus' life, it would give us the key which would unlock the mystery of Jesus' power as a teacher. Can we not see him sitting near the Treasury, quietly taking in all that was happening about him, watching the throng coming up to the

⁷ Matthew 13:24.

⁸ Matthew 13:31.

⁹ Matthew 7:16.

¹⁰ Mark 12:41-44.

Treasury and depositing their money, just as you and I might watch the fascinating panorama of a city street. Suddenly he sees this poor widow among the others drop her two mites into the Treasury. From that moment he is all alert. In the midst of the restless multitude he finds the pure noble soul, who was willing to sacrifice even all her living for the religion of her people. When he calls the attention of the disciples to this incident, and says to them, "This poor widow cast in more than all they who are casting into the Treasury," it seems as if he had seen the innermost secrets of her soul, and had read there the purity, the nobility, the grandeur of a true child of God. Do you wonder that Jesus spoke with authority?

I cannot refrain from referring to one more incident which indicates the simple method of Jesus. Perhaps you have already recalled the incident of Jesus and the Lawyer which was a part of the scripture lesson. That incident always impresses me anew with the mental acumen of Jesus and the power that he had of reading the motives and inner feelings of the men with whom he came in contact. This lawyer, doubtless thinking that he could force Jesus into an embarrassing position by his questions asked for him what he should do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus had answered by saying that he should love God and his neighbor, the lawyer asks, "Who is thy neighbor?" Then Jesus tells him his story of the man who fell among thieves. The priest and the Levite, whose duty it was to love their neighbor, had passed the sufferer by, he says. Then comes the Samaritan, of whom no good was expected and he ministers unto him. Having related this story, Jesus turns on the lawyer with the pointed question, "Which of these three thinkest thou proved neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?"¹¹ The lawyer had to answer his own question. Here again in the poor outcast Samaritan, Jesus had found the presence of the living God, and he had taken into his own life the lesson that the Samaritan had taught him.

The gospels are full of these incidents which tell us so plainly that he who may read, that Jesus knew the life and the habits of the men of his own time, of the men, with whom he came in contact daily. In them he saw the spirit of God manifesting itself, and from their lives he picked up the bits of truth which he wove together into his gospel of love and hope.

¹¹ Luke 10: 25-37.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."¹² he said, and he knew it was true, because he had seen the truth of it established in the lives of the plain people of Palestine. He found a bit of fine noble life in one person, and a bit in another, and still more in the third, and putting them all together, he sees in this composite ideal of men, his own ideal. It is like the process of meaning. He takes a thread of goodness here, and another there, and a third from some other soul, and so on, until finally he has gleaned from the lives of his fellow men threads enough to weave the fabric of the moral ideals. By this moral ideal he lives, and the truths of this moral ideal he teaches, and his teaching is the teaching of authority, because everything that he says is the outgrowth of his acute insight into human nature. Every truth that he utters has been tested and tried in the daily life of the people whom he knew. Can you wonder that the multitude were astonished at the authority of his teaching, when he had drawn from the very depths of their souls, the truths that he was uttering, when he knew that he was but returning to them the divine truths that they had given to him.

But over and above the appreciation of this manifestation of God in nature, and the revelation of God in the souls of his fellow men, there is the simple but definite consciousness that God was in his own soul. In the realization of this truth Jesus rises to the height of his spiritual genius. Feeling within the depths of his own soul the deep emotions which were struggling to express themselves in love and service, realizing that within him were great powers of love and hope demanding of him that he devote his life to the expression of those powers, he had felt the sympathetic touch of the spirit of the loving father in his heart, he had heard the voice of an all-powerful God commanding him to go forth to minister unto his fellow men, to teach and to live the gospel of love and hope unto eternal life.

This consciousness of the spirit of God within him permeates his whole life. Indeed, he lives as if he believed that he was the temple of the living God. "I and my Father are one."¹³ "Who hath seen me, hath seen the Father."¹⁴ These indicate the extent to which this truth of God in his life had taken possession of

¹² Matthew 5:7.

¹³ John 10:30.

¹⁴ John 14:9.

him, and his life tells us how he had given himself up to its commands. Can you wonder that he spoke with authority, when he had the dynamic of God's power within his soul, and the truth of God's laws revealed in the human heart, within his mind.

All these powers and truths are ours if we but ask for them. We, also, may come to have this deep authoritative conviction of the eternal reality of God's care and love for us. We do not need the authority of an infallible church, or an inspired book, or a divine prophet. To us is given the opportunity of seeing God and knowing God even as it was to Jesus. We live in the midst of a beautiful world of nature, where the same divine wisdom, the same divine spirit is manifesting itself to us even as it did to Jesus 2,000 years ago. Yes! Are not the evidences of God's all-powerful hand forced upon us today with a greater clearness, and with a deeper meaning, than could have been the case in Jesus' time? Our scientific studies have enlarged the world into a universe and divided the common materials into the minutest particles. Laws more wonderful than the tales of mythology have been discovered. Things are done every day before our very eyes, which in the time of Jesus would have been recorded as miracles. If ever in the history of man it were possible to see the guiding hand of an all-powerful intelligent God behind these laws of nature, that time is today. The more we discover, the more wonderful it becomes. Our great peril is, not that God may not manifest himself to us in nature, but that we become so accustomed to his manifestations, may overlook them. We ought always to hear the voice of God saying to us, "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."¹⁵

We are living too in the midst of saintly souls, whose daily life is a manifestation of God's bountiful love and kindness. We may see the poor widow drop her two mites into the Treasury, if we but look. We may see the good Samaritan ministering unto those who have fallen by the wayside, if we but have a care for beautiful souls. We may see the same pure noble-minded souls today that Jesus saw in Palestine. We do not have to go back to the ages that are no more for the sainted ones whose lives may give us the threads for the fabric of a moral ideal. We do not have to turn back the pages of history to find lives in which we may see courage, purity and divinity. Here again our peril is

¹⁵ Exodus 3:5.

that we may overlook the lives of beauty and purity and forget the ever-present spirit of love and devotion and care. The world that you and I live in is filled with the beautiful souls, we come in contact with them every day. I believe that never before were there so many noble lives, who are the living revelation of an eternal loving God as at this moment. It is for us to search out these threads of gold, and take them up into our lives, thereby becoming the richer and nobler for having come in contact with them.

Finally the spirit of God is within each human soul. You and I are the living revelations of God. What a profound inspiring thought it is to think that the spirit of the same God is within us as was in Jesus. Yes, what a sacred being you and I ought to consider ourselves. Do we not feel deep within the inmost recesses of our soul the commands of the Divine Spirit? In those quiet hours, alone by ourselves, or in moments where we are stirred by a noble personality, there arise in our minds resolutions to do noble heroic things, to lead pure manly lives. That is the voice of God speaking to us, even as it spoke to Jesus. Those are the greatest moments of our lives and what is most beautiful about it all is that they come to the life of every human being. The voice of God speaking to us within our own hearts. It is a grand truth, and one which ought to fill us with awe and reverence and inspire us to lives of nobility and purity and activity.

Let us, then, away with our doubts. Let us not ask for any other authority in our religious life than the authority in which we live and move and have our being. Oh, that we could see the real revelation of God in our own day and generation, as Jesus saw it in his. Could we but read God's word as it is written in the marvelous book of nature, and in the divinely inspired book of the human soul, our doubts would vanish, and our lives would be transformed into the hopeful triumphant certainty which forced Jesus to say, "I and my father are one." Whittier feels this truth which is born of a deep conviction and proved by human life, as he writes,

Yet, in the maddening maze of things
And tossed by the storm and flood.
To one fixed trust my spirit clings

I know that God is Good!¹⁶
Shall not you and I open our hearts and our minds to this simple
divine authority of our life. Let its truth guide us in our
daily living, and its commanding spirit lead us without doubt
and without fear into the uncertain tomorrow.

¹⁶ A passage from John Greenleaf Whittier's (1807-1892) poem,
"The Eternal Goodness," first published in 1867 in Whittier's
The Tent on the Beach and Other Poems.