

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Joe Biden was inaugurated on January 20th as President of our United States, completing the process of what has been called a “peaceful transition of power.” He is now the legitimate authority in our country; authority no longer resides with former President Trump. President Biden is legitimate — the president according to the law. That’s one way to think about authority. And this authority comes with legitimate power, too. When the president orders troops to a particular theater of operation, generals and their troops obey.

On the other hand, there’s another way to think about authority. These past 11 months we have been “treated” to the “wisdom” of so-called authorities on epidemiology and diseases. These “authorities” receive their authority differently than from a constitution. They are supposedly experts. Their authority comes from people who believe their expert pronouncements and follow their advice. It’s a personal authority not based on an office but on a person’s integrity. Such expert authority can be short-lived, however, if their pronouncements become untrustworthy. For example, Dr. Anthony Fauci is still involved in advising on the coronavirus, but for many the patina of his authority has been wiped off by changing opinions and admissions of deceiving the public. You know that’s so when the satirical website, The Babylon Bee, satirizes you saying you spin a “wheel of science” to figure out what you’re going to say next.

Jesus is said to have authority, twice in our Gospel lesson, teaching with authority and commanding unclean spirits. In fact, Jesus does have authority — He is legitimately the Christ, and He exudes a personal authority by virtue of His teaching.

Of course, Jesus was born as *“the Savior, who is Christ, the Lord”* (Luke 2:11), but He was not inaugurated, so to speak, until His baptism. There the Father spoke from heaven, *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”* (Mark 1:11). There on the banks of the Jordan River, the heavens were *“torn open and the Spirit [descended] on him like a dove”* (Mark 1:10), thus anointing Jesus for His Messianic office. As Peter would later preach: *“you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power”* (Acts 10:38).

Jesus’ baptism bears witness first that He was not usurping an authority that was not His — He had the unanimous affirmation of the Holy Trinity that the Son would operate in the world with a legitimate authority. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”* (Matt. 18:18), Jesus said. And again, Jesus said, *“All things have been handed over to me by my Father”* (Matt. 11:27).

Second, Peter bears witness that with Jesus' legitimate authority also came power. Thus, we see in our Gospel the people marvel at Jesus' authority, saying, "*He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.*"

Jesus uses this same legitimate authority and Divine power just a few verses hence, for the question of authority comes up again at the beginning of chapter 2 (1-12). I thought I would highlight that account here since we'll not get to it this year in Series B. Briefly, in that story, Jesus is preaching at home, and some men, unable to push through a crowd to get to Jesus, lower a paralytic on his bed through the roof down to Jesus. They surely wanted Jesus to heal the man, and Jesus surely knew it. But Jesus said to paralytic instead, "*Son, your sins are forgiven*" (Mark 2:5).

Now these words seemed like such brazen blasphemy to some scribes who were there, but it was an opportunity for Jesus to show that He had both legitimate authority: "*That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*" — *he said to the paralytic* — "*I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home*" (Mark 2:10-11) — and Divine power: the paralytic "*rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all*" (Mark 2:12). In this case, not just unclean spirits but the very dust of creation obeyed Him.

Now, you and I know that Jesus had this legitimate authority. We know that Jesus was operating with Divine power, but it's not clear to me the people did. Jesus had come down from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Would the people of Capernaum have known about the Voice from heaven and the anointing by the Spirit — so early in His ministry? Scripture doesn't say, but I doubt it. Most of them likely would only have heard of Jesus' proclaiming "*the Gospel of God*" done there in Galilee — preaching the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14).

Thus, when confronted with the marvelous things that Jesus was doing, the people were amazed with wonderment: "*What is this?*" "*We never saw anything like this*" (Mark 2:12). Without knowing His legitimate authority, Jesus was gaining a personal authority by the things He did: "*A new teaching with authority!*" This was no cocky new rabbi overestimating His wisdom and learning. Jesus was backing up His words with action.

More than that, Jesus was gaining this personal authority by His preaching and teaching. Jesus wasn't following the old rabbinic playbook that merely regurgitated what previous rabbis had said in a kind of lifeless preaching void of Divine wisdom and power. Jesus preached with authority as the One who fulfilled the Lord's prophecy through Moses: "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen*

... *the LORD said to me, ... 'I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.'*” Other scribes were used to quoting this teacher and that one in long litanies of opinions, but the prophetic, *“Thus says the LORD”* was not on their lips (Ex. 4:22, etc.).

To be sure, Jesus would quote the Scripture, even from Moses’ mouth, after all Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, nor did He come to relax them (Matt. 5:17, 19). But Jesus was different. Jesus did more. Matthew gives us a taste of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus spoke authoritatively, *“truly, I say to you”* (Matt. 5:18). *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ... But I say to you”* (Matt. 5:21-22). The people were astonished, for Jesus displayed authority.

These are the authorities Jesus would finally take with Him all the way to the cross, as Jesus said: *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again”* (John 10:17-18). Others thought they had the power to take Jesus down as they plotted against Him, but the power and authority belonged to Jesus. Pilate thought he had the authority: *“Pilate said to [Jesus], ‘You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?’”* But Jesus set him straight: *“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”*

This is the authority and power that Jesus wielded by virtue of His office and by virtue of His Divine person: authority and power to silence and cast out unclean spirits, authority and power to destroy the power of the devil, authority and power to cover up our sins by His blood, authority and power to forgive the guilt of our sin, to repair the injustice of our behavior, to remove the fear of our death — by His cross, by His resurrection — and He accomplished it: *“it is finished”* (John 19:30) — Jesus *“delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”* (Rom. 4:25).

This is the authority that Jesus wields still through His church and the pastors His Spirit calls to serve his flock (Acts 20:28). Call it “the authority of the Church” (Augsburg Confession XXVII:4), or “the authority of the Keys [Matthew 16:19], or the authority of the bishops, according to the Gospel, [it] is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments,” as we confess in the Augsburg Confession. “Christ sends out His apostles with this command, ‘As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld’ (John 20:21–22).

And in Mark 16:15, Christ says, ‘Go ... proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation’ (AC XXVII:5-7). Christ sends apostles out — and now pastors — with the promise: “*The one who hears you hears me*” (Luke 10:16).

Pastors have different abilities. Not all are doctors of the church. Not all will be able to garner the expert authority that some of our doctors have. And neither doctor nor pastor will have the kind of personal authority that Jesus had. Indeed, their personal authority comes from Christ, from teaching Him and His cross, from teaching the wisdom of God. But all pastors do have the legitimate authority to do for the Church what Christ commands them: preach the Gospel, baptize, serve the Sacrament, forgive sins. You can count on them, for these actions are based ultimately on Christ’s authority. They “are effective” we confess, “because of Christ’s institution and command, even if they are administered by evil men” (AC VIII, 2). Yes, we confess, it’s still the Lord’s doing. I hope it is still marvelous in your eyes (Ps. 118:23).

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.