

**“Set under authority” a sermon based on Luke 7:1-11 and Galatians 1:1-11
preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 29 May 2016.**

The word “authority” does not fit well with the spirit of our age, nor with “being a kiwi”. The idea of giving someone authority over us prompts instinctive resistance.

Last Thursday I struck up a conversation with a person I had not met before. As conversations do, this one took a twist. It turned to a mental illness. I quoted what I thought was an accepted psychiatric understanding. It became evident my friend did not give psychiatrists authority.

In Australia, political leaders wear with pride their scepticism of climate scientists.

We are taught to question, to challenge, to wonder who is on the take, what hidden benefit people might gain, what’s in it for them.

The tradition of free-thinking Scots.

Every day, news brings reason to question the authority of institutions,

Whether it be a church trying to cover up its sins.

Or a company paying little tax.

Or an employer pretending not to dominate.

That may be the spirit of our age, but it is not our everyday practice.

We give people authority.

When I was Clerk of the Assembly, and we were coming to a difficult vote, I noticed how people would look to certain other people to see which way they were voting before they made up their mind.

I do it myself. What company do I want to keep? With whom do I really want to stand?

When we respect a person, we give them informal authority over us. Authority born of shared values, transparent integrity.

I sense formal authority may be questioned, but informal authority is as strong as ever.

In the gospel today, the Roman centurion had formal authority. He was used to exercising it.

“I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, Go and he goes, and to another come and he comes, and to my slave, Do this and the slave does it.”

As a Roman official, he had power - political tenure, military stature, social achievement, financial security - plenty of clout and could easily abuse the privileges of his position.

Roman occupiers terrorised people into submission ... through ruthless devastation of land and towns, slaughter and enslavement of people ... crucifixion along road ways and in public places.”

Not all occupiers were ruthless, and this centurion stood out.

But he was used to a culture of patronage and mutual obligation, of giving to get support.

He had access to resources and he used them to benefit people. He used them to benefit the Jewish people of Capernaum. He was their patron, they became his clients. He higher class, they lower class, beholden to him, knowing their place.

In our time it's the equivalent of authority by cultivating the right contacts, by coercion, by domination, by carefully managed generosity, by making people beholden to us.

So far in the story, everything is according to culture, to position, to what was expected and natural and the way things happen here.

But then it gets turned upside down.

For the centurion recognises that Jesus is his superior, and the centurion a client.

We see a person acting no longer as benefactor, patron, donor, the cultivator of contacts, the one with people at his beck and call. Social position shifts. Form of interaction changes.

“The centurion sends friends to Jesus to say to him “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word and let my servant be healed.”

Used to influence, he now subjects himself to another authority.

Perhaps he had heard of the Jesus' saying ...

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves.”

“The greatest among you must become like the youngest.”

Paul wants the Galatians to understand this new authority, this new way of being organised.

In what could be a commentary on the centurion’s actions, the authority on which Paul relies must come from Christ in him.

It is not about human commission, or human authority. Nor is it about how well someone keeps a religious tradition or upholds a settled truth or is of a certain gender or of a certain standing in the community.

The radical freedom of the gospel is that we do not seek human approval. We do not please people as a way of exercising authority, doing what people want in order that they might support us.

Jesus and Paul present a very different kind of community where the greatest among you must become like the youngest.

We are about to induct an elder.

There was a time when elders exercised considerable authority over us. Only those people who had a communion token could participate in communion. Elders acted as moral watchdogs and gave entry counters only to those they deemed qualified by correct belief and proper conduct."

Fat chance now. We would not wish that on ourselves.

Yet what does it mean to be people under the authority of Christ today?

As a minister, I am accountable to the Presbytery. The whole of my life, not just the churchy bit. The Presbytery can scrutinise every part of my life.

Much of our architecture and ritual is about what we give authority to.

The table, the lectern, the processing in of the Bible, the pulpit.

Not in themselves. The authority is what they convey, what they point to: the authority of Jesus Christ.

Not the Bible in itself, but Christ in the Bible.

Not the table in itself, a hunk of wood, but the Christ it points to.

Not the preacher, but the Christ who is revealed.

So it becomes authority of the heart rather than the form.

Authority towards Christ rather than the person or the form.

I remember reading survey results in which a set of churches affirmed the authority of the Bible. The survey also showed they read the Bible no more than others.

So ultimately, we are not independent, free-thinking, self-referencing individuals.

We are people set under authority, influenced by others, not as a result of their position in society or church.

It is through what we see of Christ in them.

We are people under the authority of Jesus Christ.

I believe such a single-minded focus sets us from what confines and kills, what demeans and diminishes.

It is a radical, healing and freeing authority, in which we spend a lifetime learning to live.

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