

## ON AUTHORITY<sup>1</sup>

### **A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 6 September 2020**

On 17 April 1521, Martin Luther appeared before a special imperial assembly called to discuss his theology. In response to the charges laid against him, he said:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ... I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

On 6 July 1535, Thomas More stood on the scaffold on Tower Hill in London. Before his execution, he said:

I die the king's good servant, and God's first.

On 20 January 1649, King Charles I was arraigned on the charge that he had waged war against Parliament. Charles refused to recognise the legitimacy of the court; he declared:

I would know by what power I am called hither. I would know by what authority; I mean lawful authority.

In 1891, Oscar Wilde wrote an essay entitled *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. He concluded that:

All authority is quite degrading. It degrades those who exercise it, and it degrades those over whom it is exercised.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these historical figures raised questions about authority. As it happens, authority is one of the themes behind today's readings. In the reading from Exodus, God establishes a perpetual memorial feast to celebrate the occasion on which the Hebrews were delivered from the Egyptians. That feast is now known as Passover. It has an authority derived from God as transmitted through Moses and Aaron.

In our gospel reading, Jesus delivers some instructions about how a newly emerging church should deal with internal disputes. The text has some difficulties, because there was no such body as the church when Jesus was speaking. It is possible that the author took some words of Jesus about how disputes should be resolved, and applied them to the situation of his readers. These instructions carry the authority of the person who spoke them, that is, Jesus.

Most importantly, in our reading from Romans, St Paul instructs his readers to obey the authorities. This reading has a double layer of authority. It rests on Paul's canonical authority and it also speaks about authority. The authorities about which Paul spoke were those of imperial Rome and, in particular, of Emperor Nero.

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:1-10; Matthew 18:10-20

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891, p.

11 [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9a/The\\_Soul\\_of\\_Man\\_under\\_Socialism.pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9a/The_Soul_of_Man_under_Socialism.pdf)

Let's go back and look at the readings in some more detail. There can be no doubt that the celebration of feasts such as Passover has had a major role in forming the identity of the Jewish people.

We, as Christians, are in a similar position. We celebrate the Eucharist, a sacrament given to us by Jesus. Just as the Passover creates a Jewish identity, so the Eucharist creates a Christian identity. In each case, there is a meal. Eating together significantly cements a community. It is not too much to say that our recognition of the authority of Jesus in establishing the sacrament forms us into the Body of Christ.

The second part of this morning's gospel reading is intensely practical. No matter how well we seek to regulate our community, conflicts will always arise. The principal question is, therefore, not the presence of the conflict but how we deal with it. The process suggested here involves an escalating procedure. The first step is private. The second involves a small group of trusted associates. The final step, when all else fails, is public.

What Jesus says has some similarities to contemporary dispute resolution. In the long run, we cannot have a functioning community or society if conflicts cannot be resolved. Ultimately, that resolution may depend on the use of formal authority, as suggested by the final recourse to the church.

In our reading from Romans we also enter a practical discussion. Everybody is aware that Paul is a controversial figure in contemporary theology. Some groups have recourse to him to support a view of the role of women that limits their capacity to serve the church as priests or bishops. Others have recourse to Paul to reject the legitimacy of same sex relationships both within the church and within society.

Others see Paul as promoting a church where social divisions, such as sex, ethnic origin and social status have no place. For these reasons, we must, whenever we consider St Paul's writings, pay close attention to their context. This is not a surprising proposition; Paul was writing to specific Christian communities in specific locations. His letters frequently refer to events in those locations.

One of the themes in Paul's letter to the Romans is the contrast between the "strong" and the "weak". These categories are not a literary device used by Paul to raise theoretical questions with his readers. They identify real groups within the Christian community of Rome. Paul is referring to a local church community drawing its members from different parts of Roman society. The weak are predominantly the Jewish believers whilst the strong are predominantly the Gentile believers.

In 51AD Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, presumably for proselytising among the local population. This expulsion is recorded in Acts 18e,s where Paul met Aquila and Priscilla who have taken up residence in Corinth after their expulsion from Rome. Early in his reign, which began in 54 AD, Emperor Nero allowed the Jews to return. The letter to the Romans was written in around the year 56, shortly thereafter. We can see from this that Jews occupied a precarious position in Roman society; this was not the only occasion on which they had been expelled. In Roman society, they were weak. Their Gentile brethren had a stronger position.

As Scott McKnight says, “Ethnicity, then, is at the heart of both the tension in Rome and the gospel message itself”.<sup>3</sup> This tension runs through the whole letter. This is why, at one point, Paul challenges his readers, saying, “Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?”<sup>4</sup> The language that Paul uses reflects the strengths of the mutual hostility; the Gentiles disdain their fellow Jewish Christians for their unnecessary scruples, while the Jewish Christians pass judgement on those who do not conform to the laws contained in the scriptures. Paul, who believes that the church should have no such divisions, insists that the Christians in Rome live out their theology in everyday life.

The specific problem that Paul referred to in our reading was that of paying taxes. We know from Matthew’s gospel, that paying tax to the Romans was a problem for the Jews.<sup>5</sup> Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay such taxes. He asked for a coin that bore the Emperor’s image and said famously, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”. This question made sense only because taxation was a contested issue.

The Jews who had returned to Rome, found themselves once again paying taxes to Caesar. Refusing to pay taxes was a form of passive aggression in contrast to physical violence or armed rebellion, which they were in no place to undertake. In this way, they lived out their theology in the presence of an oppressive government.

Paul wanted a new lived theology and, in essence, asked this question: What is the best way for Christians to live appropriately in the civil society? His answer is that they should seek peace. Thus, he concludes that the best approach is to begin by obeying the authority of civil society. The weak in the Christian community, are to observe the law. In contrast, the strong in the Christian community are to use their power and privilege appropriately.

In the previous chapter, Paul urged his readers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice. As McKnight comments, that “sacrifice is an embodied way of life. ... What [Christians] do is their sacrifice: when they speak, listen, ... work, ... pay taxes, ... offer visible expressions of care [and] respect ... Their sacrifice is their embodied life.”

But now we come to the most difficult question of all: what do we do if the civil authorities do evil? Surely Paul can’t mean that we must obey every single command that any apparently legal authority might give us? Recognising that Paul was speaking to specific circumstances in a specific location, do we draw general conclusions from what he said? There is no simple answer to this question. We do know, however, that, later in the reign of Nero, after the great fire, the Roman state turned against the Christian community in Rome. Paul also died in that persecution.

We might, however, seek some guidance from a modern theologian who faced this question directly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer died at the hands of the Nazi government in Germany because he was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Earlier in his career, when the persecution of Jews was beginning, and welcomed by many German Christians, Bonhoeffer wrote a controversial essay entitled “The Church and the Jewish Question”.

As a Lutheran, Bonhoeffer was committed to the separation of church and state along the lines proposed by Paul. He suggested three possibilities for the church in the face of evil government.

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<sup>3</sup> This sermon draws heavily on Scott McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*, Baylor University Press, Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 14:10

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:15–22

The first was to call the state to account for its actions. The second was to serve the victims of those actions. The third possibility was “not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.”<sup>6</sup> In the end, Bonhoeffer took the third possibility, and the wheel ran over him.

We should follow Bonhoeffer’s advice about calling government to account and caring for victims of injustice. We may fervently pray that we will never be faced with his third option but we may not assume that it could never happen.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/dietrich-bonhoeffers-theology-of-resistance/10766546>

<sup>7</sup> Consider this comment on the situation of Catholics in Hong Kong: [https://www.ucanews.com/news/hong-kong-church-divided-as-beijing-turns-the-screw/89420?utm\\_source=SS&utm\\_campaign=SpiceSend&utm\\_medium=email#](https://www.ucanews.com/news/hong-kong-church-divided-as-beijing-turns-the-screw/89420?utm_source=SS&utm_campaign=SpiceSend&utm_medium=email#). During the past week, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece exploring the possibility that, after the forthcoming presidential election, a defeated Donald Trump might refuse to leave the White House. It asked readers to contemplate what they would then do. Christians in the USA would then be faced with a question of the kind that I have raised. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/opinion/trump-election-2020.html>



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