

Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You have shown us light instead of darkness, peace instead of strife, joy instead of sorrow, love instead of hatred and trust instead of fear. Open up our lives to the enormous possibilities of our spiritual walk with You, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Your compassionate and powerful agent of grace. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Broken families

Pray for the Christian institution of marriage upon which all family life is built within a large part of the world. Pray against the evils attempting to remove this example from society.

On-going prayers

- *Pray today for the ongoing civil strife in parts of Sri Lanka*
- *Give thanks for the gifts of life and joy and love.*
- *Pray for the security of the seas and the problem of piracy*

Meditation

Show us who You are, Lord God;
Reveal Yourself, in unambiguous truth.

Through creation, reveal the ingenuity of Your Spirit;
Through salvation, reveal the integrity of Your will;
Through forgiveness, reveal the brilliance of Your love;
Through healing, reveal the extent of Your compassion;
Through righteousness, reveal the justice of Your will;
Through guidance, reveal the wisdom of Your counsel;
Through insight, reveal the true vision of Your eternity;
Through awesome power, reveal Your complete control;

Show us who You are, Lord God;
Let there be no misunderstanding.

Bible Study - Matthew 21:23-27

²³ *When he came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?'* ²⁴ *Jesus replied to them, 'I will also ask you one question. If you tell me the answer, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things.'* ²⁵ *Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?"* ²⁶ *But if we say, "Of human origin," well, we are afraid of the crowd, for all consider John to be a prophet.'* ²⁷ *So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.'* *So he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'*

Review

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem the morning after the day of His triumphal entry and headed straight for the Temple. There were people there who had heard about this teacher but not listened to Him speak, and after what He had done the day before, there was no difficulty in raising a crowd! Meanwhile, Jesus' arrival was a source of concern to the authorities, who had already sent a delegation the day before to challenge His healing (21:14). It is highly likely that they would have conferred together, seeking the opinion of any who had previous experience of challenging Jesus. They would have discovered that it was extremely hard to trick Jesus, and that most attempts to do so in the past had only ended in public failure, as when Jesus had been challenged about healing on the Sabbath (12:10ff).

Chief Priests and elders of the people The people who came to question Jesus were the 'chief priests and the elders of the people'. The chief priests were the ancestors of the ruling priestly families who organised the religious practices of Jewish people. The Roman authorities allowed a form of Jewish 'home rule' with the understanding that peace was rigorously kept, and the territory remained loyal to the Empire (meaning that its taxes were paid). In Jesus' day, a Roman Procurator named Pontius Pilate had oversight of Judea, and the senior chief priest was Caiaphas, son of the aging High Priest Annas. The 'elders of the people' were other members of influential families in Jerusalem who sat together with the chief priests on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council responsible for law and order, and all religious matters in Jerusalem and Judea.

Previous confrontations between Jesus and the authorities had been with provincial scribes and Pharisees, so the stakes were now raised far higher than before. Although the provincial authorities had wanted to kill Jesus (12:14), those now confronting Jesus now had the power to do this if they felt that His actions compromised the religious and public peace. They could affect an arrest and hand people Him over to the Romans, who would rapidly dispose of anyone sent to them for sedition. Yet this is why Jesus had to come to Jerusalem. It was no good sniping at Jewish religion as being corrupt and outside the will of God from the province of Galilee. If Jesus was going to fulfil His ministry, this had to be done in Jerusalem, in front of these very leaders.

Questions and questions? The chief priests came and challenged Jesus with a well prepared plan. From their point of view, if Jesus held back from declaring that He was Messiah, He would belittle Himself in the eyes of the public, but it was unlikely, from the reports they had, that Jesus would do this. Their question was designed to 'call his bluff', and obtain from Him a clear and uncomplicated statement that He was the Messiah. This would be blasphemy, and they would be able to arrest Him because as far as the Romans were concerned, this was subversion. Their questions gave Jesus two chances to fall into their trap, neatly summing up the dilemma in which they hoped to place Jesus; 'by what authority are you doing these things?', and 'who gave you this authority?' (v23).

However, Jesus responded not in an aggressive way, but with a standard rabbinical method of entering into debate, by asking another question in return which sought to tease out the key issues of interest. The countering of one question with another was no offence, but rather an accepted form of intellectual challenge, so Jesus asked the telling, but highly relevant question, 'did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?' This was the same question on authority and its origins that was being asked of Him, except that Jesus was more open about it than His accusers were. In this, Jesus showed a genuine desire to debate; He wanted to know what the authorities thought. He wanted to know what they thought of John, because what he said and did was a clear alternative to the rituals of Judaism, yet the crowds loved him so much that Herod had been afraid to have him killed! Were the chief priests prepared to be honest and state clearly where they stood concerning John's work?

The failure of the authorities The accusing group of chief priests and elders drew to one side and began to argue with one another (21:25). Their dilemma shows that although they

had attempted to set a trap for Jesus, they did not have the skill or interest to turn the issue back to Jesus again using the usual forms of rabbinical debate. Moreover, what had happened exposed them instead of Jesus. They could not acknowledge John's Baptism as from heaven (meaning, from God), because that would justify Jesus' ministry. Neither could they say that John was not prophet, because if they did, it would not be Jesus they had to arrest for disturbing the peace, the crowds might turn on them!

Their eventual reply that they could not answer Jesus' question was a complete abdication of moral authority. They did not have the courage to say what they believed, for no other reason than political expediency, and this was probably clear to any who observed what was happening. The reply also meant that what consequently happened to Jesus was not just due to the failure of the Jewish religious leaders to accept Him as Messiah. It was due to their moral corruption and greed, in attempting to hang on to power at all costs, and unwilling to countenance any redeeming work of God in their midst. Jesus finally told the chief priests that, as He had said, He would not reply to them if they could not answer Him (21:27). The chief priests had indicted themselves in the eyes of all present, and it was evident that if they could not enter into a genuine quest for truth, then there was no debate to share. Jesus had won an intellectual and moral war, but the battle had only just begun!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you understand what Jesus was saying about His ministry, and what He was saying about John the Baptist?
2. Why were the religious authorities were so opposed to Jesus and all that He said and did?
3. Ask yourself whether the baptism of John came from heaven? What answers do you come up with?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The intellectual battle between Jesus and the ruling authorities is intense, but fascinating to follow. There is much more to come, of course, but each scenario is different and tells us more about Jesus. His example teaches us that sometimes we need to be able to respond to critics of the Faith with well honed, even 'academic' answers, for that is sometimes the only way to correct those who insist that their own understanding of things is right, and God's is wrong. We depend upon Jesus of course, but we need to be able to defend our faith, for the good of Christian witness throughout the world.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What do you feel about the contribution of academic theology to the life of the church in your country? You may be positive or negative about it, but what can you do to understand it more fully? You can only debate if you know your subject!*
- *Pray for all who find it hard to rationalise their thinking and come up with clear concise questions and answers. Many people find it hard to express the deeper things of faith, so pray for the Lord to help us grow in our understanding.*

Final Prayer

It is good to know, heavenly Father, that Your Love conquers all. Grant that I might know this truth throughout my life, and that no moment may pass when I lose sight of the victory