

would be indicating publicly that they accepted that the Messiah had come. This would lead them into discussing whether Jesus was the Messiah, and they were not prepared to do that!

When they refused to give their answer, it meant that Jesus was able to walk away from the questions they posed Him. He had used rabbinical method against the religious authorities completely effectively. Jesus was able and willing to answer the questions of the authorities, but only if they were willing to deal in truths rather than the politics of power. It is quite likely that the High priests, scribes and elders went away from Jesus utterly frustrated and outwitted. They would return again soon with a further attempt to catch Jesus out (12:13f.) An intellectual but deadly game of cat and mouse had begun between Jesus and the religious authorities.

### Application

The trouble was that the religious authorities regarded this incident as a matter of political expediency rather than a matter of honesty and truth. They were also caught out as able to ask questions but unable to answer them, and because of their prevarication, they were unwilling to face the need to make decisions. In other words, the root of their problems lay not in their intellects but in their stubborn wills.

It is unfortunately true that when people have positions of power, the same problems beset them whether they are in the church or not. Satan will always try to make the simple seem complex, prefer half truths to truths, rather hear questions (however good they are) to answers, and delight in prevarication rather than the resolution of issues. All of these problems can and do occur within the church, but the task of the Christian is to know the Gospel well, and know that we can learn from the stories of Jesus and the Pharisees, because they demonstrate the folly of Satan's ways. The church is always compromised when doubt, however honest, is preferred to faith, when the doctrines of the church are unclear rather than clear, and when Christians cannot give good reasons for their faith when asked. However, this need not be the case. If we live by the faith we profess, are prepared to risk all by being open and honest about what we believe, and are always willing to use our intellect to explain our faith with confidence and joy, then Christ will live in our midst and the church will flourish.

There are few amongst us who cannot spot the problems associated with the religious authorities faced by Jesus, and when we come across them today, they need to be faced and dealt with so that the church of God can fulfil its task.

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Jesus posed a threat to the authorities in His day. Does the church or should the church pose a threat to the authorities today?
2. Discuss the reasons why people in the church can sometimes find it hard to face problems and deal with them.
3. Discuss the best ways for a church to promote openness and discussion of its problems so that it can grow in grace.

### Discipleship

Is there any forum within which you can discuss the way your church is organised and lead, which you consider to be safe and not upset people unnecessarily? Can you constructively criticise your leadership, not because you wish to tear down people from office, but wish to build up the church through the people to whom God has given authority? Do you have people with whom you can discuss these things; and more than this, do you feel that you can go to those in positions of power and authority and share what is on your heart? Take time to consider these things, and if possible, find others with whom to discuss any concerns you have.

### Final Prayer

Dear Lord, hear us today. Hear the cry of those who are in distress; hear the stories of those who have been abused, hear the anguish of those who have been bereaved, and hear the heartbreak of those whose lives have been shattered. Minister to these dear people through those around them, through the Holy Spirit, and through Your sovereign power and might. AMEN

### Prayer

Lord God and Holy Father; You see the work of our hands, and the effort we put into each thing we do. Forgive us when we fail to do our best or leave to one side what we know should be done. Empower us, for the sake of Jesus Christ Your Son, to put our all into what You have placed before us to do; and at the end of our day hear Your words; 'Well done!' Bless us, we pray, through our daily work; to Your praise and glory, AMEN.

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: The Streets

Pray today for those people who clean the streets. In some countries their work is very poorly paid; and there are some places where street cleaning is done largely by (manned) machines. Nevertheless, the condition of the streets says a great deal about how a society cares for its people and the environment. Pray for these issues and for all those responsible for them.

### Meditation

- If you care for your brother,  
Greet him, speak to him, and make him welcome.
- If you care for your sister,  
Look after her, give her attention and show her affection.
- If you love other people as you love yourself,  
Do not hold back on doing anything you can to help others.
- If you care for your father,  
Take notice of him, listen to his stories and learn from him.
- If you care for your mother,  
Spend time with her, love her, and take care of her needs.
- If you love elderly people as you love yourself,  
Honour them with the best of your attention and love.
- If you care for your son,  
Give him of yourself, hear his cries and nourish his soul.
- If you care for your daughter,  
Listen to her, build up her confidence, and give her of your best
- If you love little children as you love yourself,  
Welcome them into the world they will inherit from you!

### Bible Study - Mark 11:27-33

<sup>27</sup> They came again into Jerusalem; and as He was walking about in the Temple, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders came up to Him <sup>28</sup> and said to Him, 'By what authority do you do these things, or who gave you the authority to do them?'

<sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>30</sup> Was the baptism of John of heavenly or of human origin? Tell me!' <sup>31</sup> They discussed this among themselves, saying, 'If we say "of heavenly origin," then He will say, "why then did you not believe him?" <sup>32</sup> But if we say, "of human origin ..."' (they were afraid of the people, for they all thought that John was a prophet.) <sup>33</sup> So they gave Jesus this answer: 'We do not know.' Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'

## Review

After Jesus had made a dramatic scene of turning over the tables of the money changers in the Temple the day before (11:15-19), the news of what He had done reached the ears of the Temple authorities (11:27,28). Through the incident of the cursing of the fig-tree, Jesus had explained to His disciples the meaning of what He had done, which was that Judaism had failed (see study on 11:12-25), and His deeds in the Temple were a prophetic and public demonstration of the same thing. It therefore comes as no surprise to us to find that this highly provocative act was followed by a series of confrontations with the religious authorities, who sought to challenge Jesus' right to do these things. All this is recorded in Mark 12, starting with today's passage. In every situation, Jesus' wit and knowledge of God proved more than capable of seeing off the religious authorities, together with every argument they could bring either against Him or in order to trap him. In this passage, Jesus had struck a blow at the very root of Judaism, and the authorities were not going to let this go unchallenged.

The chief priests, the scribes and the elders (11:27) were the representatives of the Council (sometimes called the Sanhedrin), the governing body of both the Temple and also of all Israel. Of course, they were subject to their Roman overlords, but providing there was no trouble, they could do what they wanted. Indeed, by special permission of the Emperor in Rome, they had a cohort of Roman soldiers at their disposal for the purpose of keeping the peace in the Temple and its extensive surrounds. When they asked Jesus 'by what authority do you do these things ...' the question was entirely predictable. Everyone in Israel knew that the Sanhedrin had the authority to manage the affairs of the Temple, so what right did Jesus have to challenge what was going on there?

We can easily imagine the scene in the Temple the day after Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers. Everyone had set up their stalls again, and the business of the Temple went on as before. Jesus walked around the Temple (11:27) purposefully observing that the business of the Temple was going on as before, and when the authorities found Jesus to challenge Him, we can almost imagine the smirk on their faces. Who had the real authority now? Why, they did! Everyone could see that everything was back to normal within a day; how insignificant was Jesus' little protest! Yet Jesus was never so dangerous in an argument as when His opponents believed that they held the upper hand! It is quite possible that Jesus was waiting for the delegation to arrive and question His right to try and change what was done in the Temple courtyards, and He was ready with His own question.

In replying to the authorities, Jesus used a rabbinic technique familiar to those who questioned Him. He promised to answer His opponent's question if they could answer one of His questions (11:29), and He then asked the religious leaders their opinion about John the Baptist and the origins of his authority (11:30). The response He obtained shows the awful tragedy of religious authorities the world over; they did not answer the question directly or according to conviction, rather, they discussed the political consequences of any answer they might give. Consequently, they answer they gave was vague, and Jesus was able to walk away from their challenge unscathed. What He had asked could have been answered simply and directly, but the religious authorities proceeded to walk into the trap Jesus had set them; a trap that was merely a consequence of their own insecurities! Instead of taking advantage of their authority within the Temple, they lost their confrontation with Jesus in full view of the public!

This reading shows how futile it is to argue with the truth, specially the truth of God. People still argue with Jesus and can spend their whole life doing so; but because Jesus is God, we will only win when we come to accept that He is right!

### Going Deeper

Our passage reads like sparring between Jesus and the religious authorities, but it was far more than this. The issue was who was acting on God's authority and who was not? Both sides could not be correct about what they believed! We know that Jesus was right and the

religious authorities were wrong, so we can now look back on what was said and done to see how wrong these people were about God; and we can learn from their mistakes.

### **The Sanhedrin**

It is normally assumed that the people who came to Jesus were representative of what we now call a Sanhedrin (a formal word for a council, see above). This is most likely to be the case, but it is worth noting that there is some uncertainty about the word and it may be wrong to suggest that the 'Sanhedrin' was a fixed, formal body in Jesus' day (see, for example, Mark 14:55, 15:1, John 11:47, Acts 6:12, 22:5 etc). In the Bible we find two words used to describe a council of leaders, either the Greek word 'presbyterion' meaning 'council of elders' or the Greek word 'synedrion' (hence 'Sanhedrin') meaning 'a council of leaders'; the first of these having a largely civil meaning and the second having legal and military overtones. Only in the second Century AD do Jewish documents speak of a formal governing 'Sanhedrin' of Judaism. In Jesus' day, the body governing religious and civil affairs was certainly made up of senior members of the family of High Priests, the scholars of Judaism who were the scribes, and community leaders or 'elders', but the constitution of this group was not as fixed as it was in later years. Who, exactly, was entitled to be on this group remains something of a mystery. Also, many of the elders and the scribes were active members of the party of Pharisees, who had a strict approach to the laws of Moses and the traditions which had built up around them. Other elders and scribes belonged to the rival faction of Sadducees, and it is often assumed that in Jesus' day, the family of High Priests remained loyal to the Sadducees.

The people who came out to see Jesus were most probably a small representative group of the High Priestly family together with scribes and elders, whose job was to put Jesus in His place and report back to the rest of the Council

### **Questions of authority**

In verse 28, the religious authorities ask Jesus two different questions; 'by what authority ...' and 'who gave you this authority ...' The impression given us is that when they found Jesus, they immediately fired a number of questions at Jesus all around the question of what right did Jesus have to upset the usual running of the Temple sanctuary. It is interesting that Jesus responded by saying 'I will ask you one question ...' so instead of lots of questions asked of one man, Jesus would ask one question of all those surrounding Him with these somewhat aggressive questions.

Jesus chose to ask a question about John the Baptist, asking what they thought of His ministry, and He asked about whether they thought the baptism of John was of 'heavenly or human origin' (11:30). In Jesus' day, people did not use the Hebrew word for 'God' directly, so the term 'heavenly' was a way of saying 'of God', and Jesus' question therefore asked whether John's work was a human work, or of God. There is little doubt that most people including many religious people such as the Pharisees (who came to John – see Matt 3:7) regarded John as a prophet, but that is not to say that everyone agreed with what He said or followed His teaching. As with many people who have good intellect but are highly involved with the politics of power, the religious authorities were good at asking questions but not so good at answering them, especially ones which exposed their own shortcomings! Their main concern was that if they gave any answer to Jesus, they would be shown up publicly as being inconsistent. The truth was that they were happy to venerate John now he was dead (6:17-29), but as Mark and the common people of the day knew full well, they had not accepted any of His radical teaching either about repentance or about the coming of the Messiah.

The report of what the religious authorities discussed among themselves is not straightforward. When they considered what might happen if they answered Jesus' question by agreeing that John's work was 'of heavenly origin' (11:31), they did not consider the possibility of Jesus saying; 'well that is my authority too!' which is how we might think the conversation would develop. The situation was more subtle, and the authorities realised this. They thought that if they accepted John's authority as from heaven, then Jesus would say; 'why then did you not believe him?' This would lead them into difficult waters because John had prophesied the coming of the Messiah, and if they publicly accepted John's status as a prophet, then they