

*What authority?*

As part of my efforts to come to terms with living in Amsterdam I have been reading a wonderful history of the city which is called ‘Amsterdam: the Most Liberal City in the World’. This week I finished it and the last chapter dealt with recent history including the 1960s. Some of you Amsterdammers may remember the ‘60s when this city was very much associated with what was known as the counter-culture, a youthful reaction against post-war society and one which was infused with a belief that things needed to change drastically and that a better world was possible. Some of you will recall the rise of the Provo movement, a group of mainly young people who were anti-establishment and who used non-violent methods to taunt the authorities – maybe we have some ex-Provos here this morning! Or you may recall John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1969, at the end of that era, choosing to hold their ‘bed-in’ the Amsterdam Hilton hotel where they demonstrated for world peace. What was significant about the 1960s, because we are still very much living with the consequences today, was that there was a massive breakdown in respect for what we call ‘the establishment’, for those with power and authority. So it was the era of the rise of satire, when people began to make fun of the great pillars of society – the government, the church, the police. Politicians and priests and police no longer automatically commanded respect – in fact in some cases they were held in contempt. And so it has continued ever since as the institutions of the establishment have been exposed by scandals and by incompetence – and their authority has become hollow and vacuous.

And suddenly we are not a million miles away from our readings this morning because here too there are authorities who are being profoundly questioned, authorities that were very much a part of the establishment. And I want to find our way into these readings by trying to tease out two different kinds of authority that we find in them, and the way in which Jesus and Micah in particular are exposing the clash between these two authorities.

You see, on the one hand there is what is sometimes called ‘derived authority’. Derived authority is so-called because it is derived purely from a particular role or status or position that someone has. Think for example a head-teacher. She has a certain derived authority simply because of her position in a school. So it was always a serious matter to be sent to the head teacher

because it's a position that carries with it a certain degree of clout, irrespective of the character or of any personal qualities of the teacher. Same with a police person. When you are driving down the motorway and you suddenly notice that blue light on the car behind you flashing your heart sinks because you recognise the derived authority of the person driving it. You don't know them, you know nothing about them, their personal qualities, but you know that they're police and so they have the authority and power to punish you for speeding. And such derived authority is often signalled by certain external trappings. For example, police wear their uniforms and ministers wear dog collars and politicians drive around in big fancy limousines.

But along with derived authority there is also what might be called 'lived' authority and this is different. This is an authority that comes purely from the personal character and qualities of a person. Such people may not have any status or standing in society. They do not wear a uniform. They just live lives that are somehow compelling. So, for example, last Friday and yesterday some churches were celebrating All Saints and all Souls Day, occasions when Christians remember people we call saints – people whose lives have in some ways been radiant with God and exemplary. They may not have had any social standing whatsoever, in fact they usually didn't. They may have had no rank or status in society. But somehow their lives stood out. Their lives have been seasoned with Christ such that they have had a living authority about them which has commanded respect.

And of course problems arise when people who have been invested with derived authority due to some position that they hold are shown to lack lived authority and integrity. A gap opens up between external trappings and lived reality. Then you have the bent cop, or the corrupt politician, or the naughty vicar. And here we begin to get into the issues at stake in our readings. Take the scribes and the Pharisees in our Matthew passage. These people are the walking embodiment of derived authority. They have their position and their status in society. They have their social standing, and they have all the trappings and the uniform to prove it. They sit on the seat of Moses – probably the official seat of the rabbi in the synagogue. They have their phylacteries on their fore-heads, little boxes crammed with scriptural texts. They have their robes with their long tassels that marked them out as professionals. They have their places of honour. And so people are supposed to respect them. But Jesus' complaint is that they

lack lived authority. Inside they are bankrupt as they fail to practise what they preach. They are hollow men, hypocrites, unworthy of respect.

And it's the same issues that arise in our Micah reading this morning. Here is Micah, the prophet, and he is a mere villager with no position and no credentials. He is a complete nobody, a total non-entity. He has not no status, no social leverage. And his target in our passage is a group of professional prophets who operated in the court of the king: these were official, tenured spokesmen who had become part of the furniture of the establishment. And these people, we are told, read omens for pay, and we are told that leaders take bribes and we are told that priests teach for profit. In other words all these establishment figures are mired with corruption, and where is virtue and integrity? They have derived authority because of their position, but how is it lived?

And of course the point that Jesus is making is that in his kingdom there really isn't any significance given to derived, 'establishment' authority. It's not what matters. The trappings of Jesus' kingdom are not the big seat but the basin and towel. Indeed derived authority can be an obstacle and a stumbling block to the Gospel. It's interesting that as well being the Eve of All Saints Day, Friday of last week was also Reformation day, when we remember the great movement of protest and reform that began with Martin Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From one angle what precipitated the Reformation was a clash between these two authorities. The church had this great status, its great power and position in society with all the derived authority that went with it. But of course power poisons and deep inside the church had become sick. Too many of its popes and its priests and its practices had become corrupt. It had become a barrier to God, and therefore it was devoid of lived authority. Now that was a long time ago – nearly 500 years. And of course things have moved on since then. And what has changed particularly since then is that the church has lost much of its derived authority. It is increasingly losing its status and position in society. On the one hand we live in a multi-faith society where the authority of the Church is challenged by other faiths, other religions; and on the other hand we live in a secular society where people refuse to be dictated to by any religion at all. And add to that the failure of the church to be a vibrant, authentic witness and we can understand why the church as a social institution is becoming more and more ignored and perceived as utterly irrelevant. That same book about Amsterdam that I have been reading informed me that in 1900

45% of Amsterdammers identified with Dutch Protestantism, the tradition that their ancestors had fought for. By 1971, just after the end of the 1960s, only 18% associated themselves with that faith. In 2000 the number was 5 percent and it will have fallen further since then.

And this presents us with a huge challenge. The church can no longer presume on any derived authority whatsoever. We can take nothing for granted - everything hinges on the lived authority of our witness, on the integrity and authenticity of our lives and of our life together as a church. And with that in mind, let me just share with you a couple of things that come to my mind from what I've been up to during the past week. One of my first priorities as a new minister here in Amsterdam is to make contact with some of the extraordinary Christian work that is going on in the city, particularly in what you might call 'the dark side' of the city. I'm amazed and heartened at the tremendous work being done amongst the homeless, and the drug addicts, and in the red light district and among vulnerable people without necessary papers and identification. So I was so moved this week to attend the Spe Gaudentes Christian community on the edge of the red light district, celebrating this week 50 years of patient presence and service in that area and where one of our members works as a social worker. There, in the evening, as the surrounding area geared up for its tawdry business and women took their places in their windows we gathered for prayer and worship and God's presence in the midst of it all was affirmed and prayers were lifted and there was a witness! And while the old church structures in the city decline precipitously and many congregations dwindle and the old trappings of religion die, here the church is alive and real and engaged, and while the Church's derived authority is collapsing, here its lived authority is manifest!

Then, on a different note, we had a meeting this week of the leaders of the crèche and Sunday School and Junior church. And here we discussed the huge challenge of bringing up our children in surroundings where all the external trappings of faith are collapsing and the church is no longer respected as it once was and churches are closing and children and young people are deeply alienated from the its structures. And we have to get real. The church carries no authority whatsoever with young people today and we have to use great imagination and creativity in order to commend the faith and to make it alive and authentic to them. We have to work hard to disciple our children in the faith. The old derived authority of the church has gone and only a living

authority will do. And this must be a priority for our church and it must involve all of us working together for the nurture and growth of our children. Otherwise they will be lost to the faith.

Jesus saw it all centuries ago. He saw that external trappings were irrelevant –the scribes and the Pharisees with their tassels and their tokens of authority. And the church today is being stripped of its tassels. God is calling for an authentic, lived reality where Christians roll up their sleeves and get down on their knees and make the faith real. What a great time to be a Christian! What a great time to belong to the Church of Jesus Christ! Hallelujah and amen!

O holy and gracious God,

We praise you sovereign ruler over all.

We worship you, in whose hands rest all power and authority.

And your rule comes to throw all our little kingdoms, all our petty pecking orders into disarray.

You come in Jesus Christ, who laid aside all power and glory to become a servant;

You come in Jesus Christ armed only with a basin and a towel, and suddenly the exalted are humbled and the humbled exalted – and you are found among those who have no position or place.

But God, you keep catching us out, because we keep finding ourselves in the wrong place, with the wrong mind-set.

Forgive us, God, when we seek the praise and acclaim of others, rather than the quiet assurance that we are loved by you.

Forgive us, God, when we need to draw attention to ourselves, rather than pointing to you.

Forgive us God, when acceptance and affirmation by others means more than knowing that we do your will.

Hear us we confess our sins.

But here is the good news: Christ Jesus came into world to save sinners. So know that you are forgiven and receive grace to live lives patterned by our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
we pray for those entrusted with the trappings  
of power and authority.

We pray for leaders and politicians,  
asking that you would give them integrity  
and vision and a sense of what is right and just  
and the common good.

We pray for those in authority here in this city  
That they may adopt policies that will enhance  
life for all.

And we pray today for the church,  
as in this part of the world it suffers such  
marginalisation and such a reduction  
in its status in society.

O God open us doors for us,  
doors of service where we leave behind  
position and standing and take after our Lord and Saviour,  
who laid aside his glory and took up a basin and towel

and showed what real power and authority look like.  
And God we pray for our children,  
for all our crèche and Sunday School and Junior Church,  
and for the leaders who work with them week by week.  
O God, give us grace to lead our children in the faith  
that they be nurtured and they may grow as disciples.

O god bless the life of the church here.  
Bless especially the Consistory as they meet this week  
And guide them in their deliberations.  
Grant that we may seek the peace of our church,  
and the community immediately around the church,  
and the city.

We pray all these thing son the name of Jesus, out Lord and Saviour  
who humbled himself and became the servant of all. Amen