

SELF-EMPTYING AUTHORITY IN MINISTRY

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, Sub-Dean and Professor of Mission and World Christianity, at the Community Eucharist in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd of the General Theological Seminary, on Tuesday, 27 September 2005
Year A, Proper 21: Ezekiel 18.1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25.1-14; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.28-32

Thank you for the warm welcome that you have extended to Jane and me as we have entered this community this fall.

We have a long association with the General Seminary,
but this is a new chapter in our lives and a new relationship with the seminary,
one in which we take great joy.

We are feeling very at home here, and your welcome has made that happen.
I look forward to working with you as Sub-Dean, as Vice President for Academic Affairs,
and as Professor in the area of Mission and World Christianity.

Self-emptying authority is the theme I am drawn to with you this evening.

Self-emptying authority:

the self-emptying of God in Jesus the word made flesh,
and what self-emptying authority might mean for us in our lives and ministries.
"By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus was asked by the religious leaders,
and he ends up declaring, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"

Authority was the issue

Alongside that, we hear Paul sketching through the words of a popular hymn the drama,
the deep magic behind the incarnation,
how Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with
God a thing to be grasped or exploited,
but emptied himself and took the form of a servant —

Emptied himself of what?

Emptied himself of all the prerogatives of God:

the prerogatives of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence,
the prerogative of exalted position,
and the prerogative, I would suggest, of ready-made authority.

He was in every way as we are,
facing the same choices,
with no more resources, whether internal or external, than you and I have.

Yet clearly he conveyed authority
such that those whose authority was based in hierarchical position felt they had to
ask him "By what authority are you doing these things?"

"By what *authority*?"

What *is* authority, and why is it important?

Let's reflect for a moment on authority in our own life stories.

I invite you to reflect right now on people in your life whom you have experienced as having authority for you.

Whatever authority is, we recognize it when it is there.

True authority has little need to exert itself;

instead, we place ourselves in such a relation to it that we allow ourselves to receive guidance from it.

Who are the people in your life whom you have experienced as authorities, people from whom you sought and received guidance in some way, people who shaped who you are?

Reflect for a moment on who they were or are.

What was the quality of their lives that made them authoritative for you?

From what did their authority proceed?

The dictionary defines authority in a number of ways:

a citation that is used in defense or support;

a decision taken as a precedent;

the power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior;

a person in command.

The definition that highlights our concern with authority, though, is authority as grounds, or warrant, or convincing force.

There may be no etymological link between the words authority and authenticity, but I believe the two are conceptually related:

authority proceeds from authenticity,

and authenticity conveys authority

By authority I do not mean the successful exercise of power, whether legitimately through law, appointment or election, or illegitimately through whatever kind of seizure.

Authority is related to power, but it is not the same power.

Authority, I suggest, is instead a quality of being on account of which we repose confidence in another, anticipate insight from another, and receive guidance from another.

The word *exousia* in the original Greek of the New Testament actually gives some grounds for this intuition about authority:

Exousia is rooted in the verb *exeinai*, which means to be allowed or permitted.

Ousia in itself is a form of the verb *einai*, which means to be:

as a noun on its own it means that which is one's own, one's substance or property,

or, more to the point, the being, essence or true nature of a thing.

Exousia, authority, then, is a quality that proceeds forth and comes out from one's being or essence or true nature.

What is that quality of being in which we sense authority?

I'm not sure — I'm inquiring with you in this quest — but I hazard a few thoughts.

One quality of being that supports authority and in which authority resides is a whole-hearted investment in the piece of life that one is given.

I think of Linden Harris, a ThD candidate in this seminary who was Vicar of St. Paul's Chapel at the time of 9/11.

By now we all know the story of his investment in being present in that time of suffering: how he, alongside many others, invested himself wholly in ministering to the suffering and offering the presence of Christ in that catastrophe.

With that investment and witness emptied of self, Linden has authority when he speaks of ministry in catastrophe *ex ousia*, out of the essence of his being

A second quality of being in authority is a restfulness with oneself that is not distorted by anxiety, projection or striving.

In my life I think of John Coburn, former Bishop of Massachusetts, President of the House of Deputies, and Rector of St. James here in Manhattan.

When I went for my postulancy interview with him he said just three things.

After greeting me and inviting me to a chair, he asked, "Tell me about yourself."

Well, I rattled on for about half an hour, and when I stopped he said, "Tell me about your prayer life."

Well, I rattled on about that – very devoutly, of course – for about half an hour, and when I stopped he said simply, "Thank you."

There was no prelude, no summary, no talk of process.

He was emptied of the need to project power or to manage events – he was utterly restful in himself and in the presence of God.

There I experienced authority: *ex ousia*, from the essence of his being.

A third quality of authority is centeredness in being.

In my life I think of Mbuya Mboo, grandmother Mboo, in the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe, at the little church of St. Denys in the village of Njerama.

My companions and I arrived there in the heat of the day, about 2 p.m., and found no one, no one to greet us.

Now this congregation had not experienced a priest in about ten years, ever since the Liberation Struggle had gotten really hot, so they hadn't known whether to trust that I'd actually arrive.

So we waited.

Baba Godo, the elderly catechist arrived after awhile

and when he satisfied himself that we were going to stay awhile he rang the piece of train rail that was suspended from a tree, in order to summon others, and invited us to wait some more.

As the sun was setting some church members came and prepared a meal for us.

A little later people began streaming out of the hills,

and we could hear them singing in the church, first a few, then more, then many.

When we entered the church we found it half blown away from wartime violence – bullet holes in the walls, the roof only half there – but it was full of people, maybe four hundred, in full voice and ready for an all-night vigil of preaching, praying and singing.

We had Evensong in Shona, and then the preaching began.

The first preacher was Grandmother Mboo from Tsonzo, who began preaching in a whisper,
 and the four hundred went absolutely still:
 her whisper was intense and passionate, and she could be heard throughout the church.

Mbuya Mboo began in a whisper, then moved to a soft voice.

Then she was preaching with tears, then with exultation, then in full and stirring voice.

I can't remember what she said, but in the *how* of her saying it, in her utter centeredness in Christ, wholly taken up in God's presence, emptied of self – there I sensed authority, *exousia*, because she was preaching from the essence of her being.

A fourth quality of authority is integrity.

We rightly associate integrity moral rectitude,

but that meaning derives from integrity's more basic meaning, which is the soundness of a structure in which the structure's various elements reinforce each other to form a stable whole that gets the job done;

engineers speak of the integrity of a bridge, for instance:

it has integrity when all the pieces are sound and they work together to form a bridge that carries traffic;

it lacks integrity when any part has so deteriorated that the bridge's ability to carry traffic is degraded.

So also in human character, integrity is the state in which the parts of a personality cohere with each other –

what is said, with what is done;

principles, with actions;

behavior in one area of life, with behavior in another area of life.

The result is a stable, whole and credible person who can be relied on to be true and authentic in any situation.

Desmond Tutu was just here.

His witness under apartheid was so powerful because all parts of him fit together, and this was not necessarily true of all leaders in the South African liberation struggle.

After the liberation, Tutu moved on to engage the equally difficult reconciliation struggle, sometimes in tears at the commission table as he shared so deeply the pain of those who testified to their suffering.

I sense now that Tutu is moving on again.

Both two weeks ago here and at the Consortium of Endowed Parishes during the winter, Tutu was not beating the same drums, but moving on in his own life to the contemplative struggle:

in his sermons, in his talk with the faculty, there was little reminiscing about the liberation struggle or even about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Instead, like an Indian *sanyasi* in the fourth stage of life, he seemed to be yearning ever more deeply for an ever deeper encounter with God in Christ in prayer and contemplation.

He was emptied of the need for the prerogatives of a Nobel Prize winner, emptied of the need for the crowd's adulation.

All parts of him were hanging together with what he is and who he is in this time of his life:

there I sense authority, *ex ousia*, from the essence of his being.

As a formational community, we aspire in this seminary that every student here will grow into this authority, this *exousia*, this quality that proceeds from your very being.

It is in discernment of such *exousia*, such authority, that communities have offered you up into the leadership of the church – a leadership that proceeds not *ex officio*, from this or that office of job you may be in;

not *ex ego*, for the gratification of your vanity;

not *ex superego*, in obedience to some overwhelming sense of obligation –

but *ex ousia*, from the essence of your being, a being that is

- committed wholeheartedly to the piece of life you've been given,
- restful in who God has made you to be,
- centered in the presence of Christ in your life, and
- connected within yourself to make an integrated whole –

emptied of prerogatives, but full in authenticity, really being who you are in Christ.

And so it is that when we speak of Christian authority we are driven back and back and back to Jesus the Christ.

In the Church there is no authority but the authority of Christ:

faithful life in Christ, that is where the authority of the Christian leader resides;

without that, ministry is only *ex officio*, not *ex ousia*.

Jesus' own authority stemmed from his faithfulness:

wholly taken up with God, he ministered *ex ousia*, from the essence of his being.

In that being, "although he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness,

and being found in human form he became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."