

Encounter with Jesus – Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law – 22 Oct 17

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at quite a few people who met Jesus physically during his ministry and last time heard from someone alive today who has had an encounter with him. Tonight we are going back to Holy Week to an encounter which happened in the Temple between the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law. They had quite a few encounters with Jesus, but this is a key one dealing with the issue of authority from God. Hilary is going to read us the story.

Luke 20:1-20

Who were the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law?

The description in verse 1 of “the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders,” basically refers to the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel under the Roman occupation. The Sanhedrin was not part of the structures Moses laid down for Israel, (although it was probably based on Num 11:16 where God told Moses to identify 70 Elders to help him with governing the people) and neither was the idea of many “chief priests”, there should have been one. The Great Sanhedrin was the supreme court of ancient Israel, made up of 70 men and the high priest (usually the president of the body). It was probably started about 70 BC by Alexander Janneaus, the Hasmonean king of Judea. The Sanhedrin consisted of elders and scholars, including the high priest, other Levitical priests, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Its purpose was to act as a tribunal in making decisions regarding the Law of Moses, but it had limited authority under the Roman Governor to manage the day to day affairs of Israel.

The chief priests belonged mainly to the wealthy aristocracy of Sadducees; they held powerful positions including the majority of the 70 seats of the Sanhedrin. They worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of Rome, and seemed to be more concerned with politics than religion. Because they were accommodating to Rome and were the wealthy upper class, they did not relate well to the ordinary people, who did not hold them in high regard. The ordinary man related better to the Pharisees, which in effect was a religious / political party and would have had followers in every town and village. Although the Sadducees held the majority of seats in the Sanhedrin, history indicates that much of the time they had to go along with the ideas of the Pharisaic minority, because the Pharisees were popular with the people.

Jesus was therefore taking on the established religious leaders and Government of Israel and challenging their authority.

How did they encounter Jesus?

Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph and cleared the sellers of doves and money changers out of the Temple and had been teaching each day in the Temple. He was therefore on the Sanhedrin’s “turf” and interfering with their neatly ordered plans, which also probably made them lots of money. At the end of Chapter 19 it says “But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.”

So they confronted Jesus when he was on their ground about who had given him authority to teach. They initiated the encounter to try and get him to incriminate himself.

What happened during the encounter?

The whole of this passage is about delegated authority and agents acting on behalf of a landowner or King. The Sanhedrin ran the temple exercised their own authority over it; they would know that Jesus had not received the authority to teach from themselves or from the

Romans. They would not accept any other human authorization as legitimate, nor regard other humans as divinely authorized; they presumably believed that God had authorized them rather than someone else to be in charge of the religious aspects of the temple. They therefore challenged Jesus' authority to teach the people, particularly in the Temple.

Jesus' question in reply was a fairly common way of debate at the time. But he turns the question around: in Jewish law, an authorized agent acted on behalf of the person who sent them, backed by the sender's full authority. "Heaven" was one Jewish way of saying, "from God". The temple authorities, particularly the Sadducees, who had to please the Romans on the one hand and the populace on the other, were already accustomed to considering the political consequences of their statements. They recognised that either answer would cause them big problems with the people – either they were disobeying God or they were denying John was a prophet – so they opt out and don't give an answer.

That could have been the end of the confrontation – 1 nil to Jesus – but Jesus is not prepared to let them off that easily. He addresses those who regarded themselves as rulers of Israel, reminding them that they are merely custodians appointed by God over his vineyard, a metaphor used often in the Old Testament for Israel which would have been understood by the Sanhedrin and the people.

Wealthy landowners controlled much of the rural Roman Empire, including the rural parts of Galilee and Judea; tenant farmers worked their land. Landowners had great status, whereas tenant farmers had little; tenants were therefore normally quite respectful to the owners. Absentee landlords were common and exercised their authority through agents – the very point they had asked Jesus about, so he is extending his question about John's authority to theirs. Payments were rendered at harvest time. Some contracts specified that the tenants would pay the landowner a percentage of the harvest; other contracts called for a fixed amount. Landowners always had power, socially and legally, to enforce their will on the tenants; a few even reportedly had hit squads to deal with troublesome tenants. In the parable the tenants act as if they are the ones with power, and they exploit it mercilessly (as opposed to the ancient ideal of a *benevolent* patron or landowner). This description fits the Jewish tradition that Israel martyred many of the prophets God sent to it.

In the light of the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism in [Luk 3:22](#), the "beloved son" clearly represents Jesus. The hearers of the parable would regard the landowner as abnormal; naively benevolent, he counted on a kindness in his tenants that their behaviour had already disproved. Rich or poor, all hearers at this point would agree that the landowner was in the right, and that he was benevolent—indeed, strikingly, foolishly benevolent. The tenants presume too much about the inheritance; although they could have seized it under certain legal conditions, the owner could also stipulate—and after their misdeeds certainly would—that someone else inherit the vineyard; or representatives of the emperor could have seized it if there was no heir. The son had to be thrown out of the vineyard to be killed, because if a dead body were left in a vineyard, it would render the harvested food impure if the food got wet. (This is in effect what the Sanhedrin did with Jesus by handing him over to the Romans – putting him outside Israel to be killed.) The listeners would wonder why the landowner had not come earlier and killed the tenants. The people's shocked and negative response is because they recognised that what Jesus is saying is that God will take the kingdom away from Israel and give it to others - which is exactly what happened. They, and the Sanhedrin, also know that Jesus is applying it against their own leaders. Jesus looks directly at them and asks them the meaning of three passages in the Old Testament – he quotes from Psa 118:22-23 but links this to [Isa 8:14-15](#) which says the Lord Almighty will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall; and [Dan 2:34](#), [Dan 2:44](#), where God's kingdom, portrayed as a rock, crushes its earthly challengers.

This is important because at the entry into Jerusalem the crowd quoted [Psa 118:25-26](#) "the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in

the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." These verses refer to the Messiah or successor to David, the Jews saw an initial fulfilment of them in David who had been rejected but later replaced Saul, and the Messiah is his successor. That is why the Pharisees called on Jesus to rebuke the disciples as it was a clear proclamation of him as the Messiah – but he refused and effectively acknowledged the title. By quoting from Psa 118 here he is linking his triumphal entry and recognition by the crowd to his authority to teach. In order to provide stability and to bind two adjoining walls together, a finely shaped block of stone was inserted that became the cornerstone. It would have been a larger stone than those normally used, and could also serve as the foundation stone. The cornerstone or the foundation stone is always significant in temple building and restoration. The building implied here is the temple; as the cornerstone of a new temple, Jesus is a threat to the builders of the old one.

What effect did the encounter have on the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law?

It confirms their view that he is a threat to their authority and control and must be got rid of. They cannot accept that he is the Messiah and from God with all God's authority. They increase their plotting to try and get him to incriminate himself to provide a basis for a charge before the Roman Governor. When they can't get him to do so they get Judas to betray him and hand him over on trumped up charges.

Discussion – There are two challenges for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

Do we ever reject Jesus' authority over areas of our lives because we want to do things our way and keep control?

Should we stand up to people in authority (Local Councils, the Government, established Church leaders) when they are not following God's ways and challenge them?