

**Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

**Pentecost 19A: Exodus, Psalm 106: 1-6, 19-23, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14**

## **The Authority that Flows from Suffering**

### **Introduction**

These past weeks, we have spoken about the ethics within a proper understanding and application of authority: whether it be an authority from the individual or an authority stemming from a group; public or private. In each of the stories that we have read, the Story of the Unforgiving Servant, the Story of the Generous Employer, the Story of the Two Sons, the Story of the Wicked Tenants, we picked up ideas about first, the foundations of authority; and second, the nature of authority – what makes authority legitimate. In sum we discovered that for Christians, authority is grounded in grace. We discovered that authority to be legitimate, needs to be marked by generosity, by liberality. We discovered various dimensions of that generosity: that authority needs to *include the dynamic of forgiveness*. In the words of the philosopher Hannah Arendt, *“God forgives in order to renew life”; so, must we!* We discovered that authority *must respect human need*, not least in the area of labour relations. We discovered that authority is for Jesus, *associated with, linked to, action, a particular type of action: action grounded in love*. Finally, last week, the theme of the Story of the Wicked Tenants revealed to us that following Jesus on “the way” involves not simply an authority that bears allegiance to a religious tradition, but to critical active engagement: a synthesis of all that we had said earlier”: authority grounded in generosity, authority that is sensitive to those whose natural rights are not respected, authority through actions of love.

Today, our last week in examining authority, we approach it differently: not so much through the lens of ethics, although the ethical is still there hovering in the background; but authority seen through the lens of spirituality, a certain sort of spirituality: a spirituality of suffering. Today we speak of authority that derives its legitimacy, its integrity, its weight, from suffering. Let’s begin with reality – a film clip – then turn to Scripture and finally, return to reality.

### **Reality – The Film Clip, “Missing”.**

This movie, *Missing*, was made a long time ago: back in 1982. It won the *Canne d’Or* award plus numerous nominations for the Academy Awards. It was banned in Chile during the military dictatorship, and I recall seeing it in a clandestine meeting of people in the little port town of San Vicente, when it was being smuggled around in 1984. The film, is true and heartbreaking, as it depicts the search by an American citizen, Ed Horman, for his son Charles, who was executed in the National Stadium in Santiago, a victim of the crazed political anger of the time. In our clip, we see a reflective Ed, still unaware of his son’s death, trying to understand his boy, trying to comprehend Charles’ aspirations for truth, for compassion, for justice, trying to comprehend Charles’ own journey, as Charles felt his way toward God, even though God remained unnamed. The sense you get as the story proceeds, is that Ed comes to deeply admire this young man, who he now acknowledges, he did not really know, as parents often don’t. He comes to see the spiritual dimension of Charles, the ‘Christian’ dimension of Charles. Charles comes to carry an authority for Ed, which in life, he had never even guessed at. For those of us who watch the movie, we see Charles’ suffering, victim-hood, the cross he ultimately bears for his work, as the authentic seal of his authority.

### **The Reading**

Let’s now turn to the Gospel, for in this story there is also evidence of authentic authority, contrasted with its opposite. This Gospel story is complex and has seen a range of interpretations through the centuries. The default reading of this story has assumed that the king represents God. As biblical and ethical disciplines have drawn closer together over the last 40 years, this simple correlation has been rightly challenged, and has led to another view. No longer can scholars equate the psychopathic king of the story with the God of Jesus, with the God who is Jesus. So, what is the more recent interpretation?

It goes like this. That this story is not about what the kingdom of God is like, but what it is *not* like. At the beginning, we hear from most bibles, *“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son”*. But here Jesus is directing his words to his opponents, the Pharisees and scribes, the power people of the day; and he is really saying, *“this is what we are told the kingdom of heaven is like,”* this is

what you guys tell us the kingdom of heaven is like, this is how you and your mates in power spin it. And if we dig a bit deeper we find that Jesus is not referring to a king as in God, but to a “man-king”, better said, “human king” (*anthropoi basilei*). Again implicitly “this is how things are under human kings like Herod”. This also seems to fit with a statement earlier in Matthew’s Gospel which denounces the widespread violence and oppression of ruling castes of the day: Matthew 11:12: “*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force*”.

In this story then, Jesus makes no bones about the perversity and violence of the powerful, about the self-serving ways they interpret, construe the kingdom. But if this is so, if this is a story about what the kingdom of heaven is *not* like, where is the positive in this story, where is the kingdom of heaven? **Surprisingly, it is found in the one without a wedding garment, the one who is expelled from the banquet; the victim who suffers the malevolent king’s brutality. It is this one, who potentially carries authority, under whom authority carries the ring of truth.** In a sense this story is a figurative presentation of Jesus’ whole life, and death. The one who is crucified by the powers, is the one whose authority we trust.

### **Back to Reality**

During the years 1987-1989, I was working in Santiago, Chile’s capital city. Part of that work involved visiting and building relationships with women who had lost their husbands, fathers, mothers, and children to the military dictatorship, either through official assassination or disappearance – meaning unofficial assassination. These women would meet four days a week in the offices of the organization that employed me: FASIC – Foundation for Christian Solidarity. One of the women I met there was Ana González, a woman just over 50 years of age. Ana had lost both her sons, her pregnant daughter in law and then her husband within days of each other: all made to “disappear”. The only one returned to her, was her two years grandson. The bodies were never found.

Contrary to expectation, Ana was not broken, not the shadow of her former-self. Indeed, she carried herself with great dignity – gently but firmly. She spoke slowly and clearly considered every word that flowed from her. Her years of suffering with the loss of virtually her whole family – something never confirmed nor denied by the military government – seemed to generate within her an unquestioned authority, which all manner of people recognized. It was her suffering that lent her authority. It was her suffering that generated within her a nobility, not only of presence but of mind and heart.

Together with other women, she formed the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Group of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared) and spoke fiercely at the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the International Red Cross, the International Commission of Jurists, and the Vatican, to name but a few. This woman, Ana González, died in 2018 from heart failure at the age of 93. The authority she carried, the authority that no-one denied, even former enemies, she carried because of her suffering. It was her suffering that lent her life and her authority weight.

There is a spirituality to authority. Those who integrate their reversal and suffering into the authority they exercise; shine, absolutely shine. People such as Charles Horman and Ana González, are signs to us of authority rightly understood and rightly lived: the sign of Christ among us.