

Monday of the Third Week of Advent

Gospel text (Mt 21:23-27): When he had come into the temple area, the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them in reply, “I shall ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I shall tell you by what authority I do these things. Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?” They discussed this among themselves and said, “If we say ‘Of heavenly origin,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we fear the crowd, for they all regard John as a prophet.” So they said to Jesus in reply, “We do not know.” He himself said to them, “Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.

“What authority have you to act like this? Who gave you authority to do all this?”

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Today, the Gospel invites us to contemplate two aspects of Jesus’ personality: His shrewdness and His authority. Let us first consider His shrewdness. He knows the human heart intimately; He knows the interior of every person who approaches Him. So when the chief priests and the elders of the people come to Him and maliciously ask, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Mt 21:23), Jesus — who knows their falseness — answers them with another question: “Where was John’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?” (Mt 21:25).

They do not know how to answer Him. If they say it was from God, they condemn themselves for not having believed John; if they say it was from men, they place themselves against the people, who regarded John as a prophet. They are trapped in a dead end. With a single question, Jesus shrewdly exposes their hypocrisy; He reveals the truth. And the truth is always uncomfortable — it makes you tremble.

We, too, are called to have the shrewdness of Jesus, in order to shake falsehood at its foundations. So often the children of darkness use all their cleverness to gain more money, more power, more prestige; while the children of light seem to let their shrewdness and imagination fall asleep. Just as worldly people use their creativity to advance their interests, Christians must employ their talents in the service of God and the Gospel. For example: when someone speaks poorly of the Church (which happens often), with what shrewdness do we respond to their negative criticism? Or in the workplace, when dealing with a

colleague who lives only for himself and “couldn’t care less” about others — with what shrewdness will we return good for evil? If we love him as Jesus does, our very presence will be quite “uncomfortable” for him.

Jesus exercised His authority through His profound understanding of people and situations. We, too, are called to possess this kind of authority. It is a gift that comes from above. The more we practice putting things in their proper place — the small things of daily life — the better we will be able to guide people and situations, thanks to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “The chief priests and the scribes were afraid of the people, of the truth. An indication of their flight was the fear of their hearts.” (Saint Augustine)
- “Never condemn. If you want to condemn, condemn yourself. I ask the Lord for the grace that our heart may be bright with the truth, big-hearted with people, merciful.” (Francis)
- “In Jesus, the same Word of God that had resounded on Mount Sinai to give the written Law to Moses, made itself heard anew on the Mount of the Beatitudes. Jesus did not abolish the Law but fulfilled it by giving its ultimate interpretation in a divine way: ‘You have heard that it was said to the men of old... But I say to you...’ (Mt 5:33-34). With this same divine authority, he disavowed certain human traditions (Mk 7:8) of the Pharisees that were ‘making void the word of God’ (Mk 7:13)” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, N^o 581)