



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, May 3, 2009
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Matthew 7:15-29
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AUTHORITY TO DECLARE WORTH

Whatever else Jesus was, he was a teacher, and the people who heard him teach were *astonished*. He did not teach *as their scribes*, but rather *as one who had authority*. The scribes' manner of teaching was to cite other authorities. We could think of their teaching as like a scholarly article that goes on for about ten pages of small print, and then at the end there are another ten pages of even smaller print for all the footnotes which cite what anyone else has ever said about the matter at hand. Such an article can give you the satisfaction of massive information, if you slog your way through it. But it is hard work, and the payoff is generally slight. Yet on occasion a truly insightful work of scholarship comes along and it gives you great pleasure. It will have only a few footnotes. You read it appreciatively for you realize you are in the hand of a master. The first kind of article cites hundreds of authorities. This latter kind, you might say, is *written by* an authority; it *is* authoritative.

Jesus spoke with authority; he did not cite the views of lots of other people. Jesus did not say, "With regard to the question of murder, some authorities say the prohibition applies to killing in self-defense, others don't; some say the prohibition extends to soldiers in the imperial army, others disagree." Rather, Jesus spoke directly to the heart of the matter: *You have heard that it was said . . . , 'You shall not kill' But I say to you [do not be] angry with [your] brother.*

He spoke with authority, but what is he an authority about? What is the subject matter of the authority of Jesus? The Sermon on the Mount makes clear it is the authority to give a true pronouncement upon the meaning of the Law. But we dare not keep Jesus' authority at arms' length. Put it this way: Jesus' authority is to give a true pronouncement upon the meaning of life—my life, your life, human life. What does my life amount to, what is it really worth? Jesus will tell you.

Jesus taught with authority, and what he taught was beautiful. Think of those lines, familiar to a hundred generations, lines of elegance and truth: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. . . . Where your treasure is, there will your heart be. . . . Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own? . . . Ask, and it will be given; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened. . . . Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction. . . . In praying do not heap up empty phrases, but pray like this: Our Father who art in heaven.*

This is elegant and beautiful and authoritative teaching about what a life is worth. True blessing may come unexpectedly in poverty of spirit. One's treasure needs to be in the right place. We should think more about our own sins than those of others. And there is hope that when we ask

and seek and knock, there will be a response, our true desires in the end will be fulfilled. And that is because we can pray to God in direct and simple language: *Our Father. Thy will. Daily bread. Forgive us. Deliver us.*

In the end, the authoritative teaching of Jesus raises the question of the worth of our life. Will I have done anything worthwhile? Will my life have any lasting substance to it? Jesus says that the person who hears his words and does them *will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.* But one who does not grant Jesus' words access to his heart is *like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand.* Rain, floods, wind—and the house falls; *great was the fall of it.*

This is the existential question. In the end, has my life been built on rock or on sand?

Jesus, who poses the question, also answers it. Not in the Bible—for the answer is still in the future. But there, at the end, it is Jesus who will pronounce the final, authoritative word on the meaning of each human life. One finds in tonight's reading the suggestion that it has to do with fruit. How can you tell a good tree? There's a lot about a tree that you can't see—what's inside the trunk, what's underground. But you can see the fruit. Good fruit comes from a good tree. So a good human might be recognized by the fruitfulness of her life. The storms came and she stood strong.

But perhaps that way of putting it is incomplete. There are accidents, there are tragedies; what counts as good fruit may not be a straightforward matter. Have you ever pondered the *lack* of good fruit in Jesus' own life? He did not succeed—those he helped turned against him, his students flunked their final exam (they ran away), no one understood him, his life made at best only a tiny difference. *We* see now the difference Jesus made, because we know about the resurrection and the good that followed from it. But on Good Friday it was just a failure.

So we might have to say that a good human life, one that produces good fruit, a life built on the rock that is Jesus, such a life might end up a seeming failure, might end up blown over or chopped down. The authoritative word of Jesus is not a predictable word. We really don't know—can't know—what the meaning of our life will be. At the great gathering of the nations at the end of time, in the parable told by Jesus (Mt 25), *everyone* is surprised at the judgment passed on their lives. All the "sheep" are told by Jesus, "I was hungry and you fed me, sick and you visited me," etc. They don't believe it. When did we see you hungry? they ask.

He spoke with authority, and not as the scribes. He will speak the authoritative last word on each human life. And that authoritative word will be both unexpected and true.

In the meantime there is much for us to do. Please, will you join with me to put our treasure in the right place, to think not overly about the sins of others, and to try to "do" the words of Jesus, who taught us to knock at the Father's door with simple prayer from the heart.