

Rejecting New and Different Third Week of Advent Monday, December 16, 2013
Nm 24:2-7, 15-17; **Mt 21:23-27** (If we are open to the authority of God and the guidance of God and the rule of God, we go along with God's direction, we can gain wisdom.)

“Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Authority is a very important issue in Scripture, but it's not what people normally think it means. Authority has to do with dominion, and dominion has to do with rule and protection and guidance. So **if we are under the authority of God, then we are ruled by God, protected by God, and guided by God.** But we can step outside of that authority, which people do when they refuse to follow the rule of God or the guidance of God. Then they are outside of the authority of God; then they are outside of also the protection of God, and they become subject to **another authority, the authority of darkness.** That is a very strange concept. Modern Western people don't acknowledge it. We might think about it. **What is the authority of darkness?** What the chief priests and elders were getting at is that Jesus was operating under the authority of darkness. Why? Because he didn't do what the chief priests and elders expected. The problem was that the chief priests and the elders had already minimized the whole tradition of Israel, minimized, truncated the whole tradition. They had replaced this rich tradition of wisdom with Torah, pure and simple.

Now wisdom can be a little bit confusing. Not everyone can understand wisdom, and surely the young cannot, but the older may. The older we get we can gain in wisdom. **If we are open to the authority of God and the guidance of God and the rule of God, we go along with God's direction, we can gain wisdom.** But it's a very iffy thing. It's not black and white.

The Torah can be black and white. **The Torah** begins with the ten commandments, what we call the ten commandments, but then expands. Even in the written record of the Old Testament there are over six hundred, but then in the oral tradition there are over ten thousand. And that gets very scrupulous, punctilious, **detailed. But that isn't what the tradition of Israel is about.** It wasn't simply a moral code about every little thing you could think of. **It was really about God being with his people, leading his people, directing his people, atoning for their sins, re-creating his creation through their participation in the mysteries of the temple.**

But the most influential teachers were pushing that aside. **The temple became mechanical.** They offered sacrifices and more sacrifices and more sacrifices until God was sick of it, at least he speaks this way to the prophets. “I loathe your sacrifices.” Why? Well, there was no more spirit there. There was no more sense of gratitude or devotion. There was no more desire to serve. It was just something one did, something one does, mechanically, as if the sacrifice itself benefited God. Well, that is ridiculous. That is a perversion of religion.

And **that’s what Jesus was faced with.** And yet these people were to a great extent sincere. They believed what they were doing was good. They believed they were right—they believed they were right. They believed so strongly they were right, **they wouldn’t listen to any other point of view, including the revelation of God himself in the flesh.** This is the precarious situation in the human nature that we can be so sure we are right, we don’t listen to God—exactly what Jesus was faced with in this particular case.

So he puts the burden back on them. So he says, “I’ll ask you one question. By whose authority did John baptize?” And they knew they were in a corner on this one because they refused to accept John’s baptism because it was something new and different, and **in their mind nothing could be new and different and from God.** God had to be same old same old. But they knew the people thought it was from God because the people had life, the people were still wanting something, the people had faith, the people had desire, **the people were expecting the Messiah.** This was the situation, very precarious. So they said, “Well, we don’t know.” And Jesus said, “Well, then I’m not telling.”