



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

“Where then does authority lie?”  
October 1, 2023  
A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

When I was a young mother, the children and I would walk to town every day to check the mail at the post office and sometimes go to the grocery store. This small southside Virginia town had its bevy of characters. There were two brothers who struggled with sobriety and wandered downtown handing out sticks of gum to everyone. And then there was a very evangelical man who stood on the same street corner prophesying every day. He would follow me into the grocery store to ask me: “Are you saved?” Having never been shy about my faith, I sometimes engaged him in conversation, explaining that “I was saved at my baptism” or “God loves us all so much, why would God not save everyone?” He was from a different religious tradition than I, and I did not want to offend him. But one day he caught me at a bad moment with two sick little ones in tow and a schedule to keep, so when he asked his same question: “Are you saved?” I said: “I am an Episcopalian; do you really think I can be saved?” He never approached me again. To him I was lost; I was one of “those” people; of course, I was not saved; I probably was not even a real believer, a real Christian. If that evangelist were still asking the same question today, I think I would not be as glib. I think I would ask him about his religious belief system, about where authority lay for him – because that is the real question.

The Episcopal Church today, indeed all Christians, either are or should be asking the same question. Where does authority lie? The Sadducees were certain, absolutely certain where authority lay. They were few in number, but were the wealthy, the aristocratic, and the governing class. The chief priests and elders were Sadducees. They collaborated with the Roman government. Indeed, they owed their position in society to the Romans. By cooperating with Rome, they retained the privileges that they so enjoyed even though they were very much traditionalists. They relied only on the Pentateuch – the first five

books of the Hebrew Bible. They flatly rejected oral tradition, the prophets, and the letters and all the other books of what we call the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

Our Episcopal tradition “reflects a balance in its devotion of scripture, tradition, and reason as sources of authority.”<sup>2</sup> In looking at tradition through Christian eyes, through our theology – what we believe about God and God’s redemptive work in Christ – we rely on what was handed down from the prophets and the apostles and their successors. Before the adoption of the authorized canon of Holy Scripture – both the Hebrew books and Christian books – the word of God was kept alive through oral tradition. Over time the authorized teachings of church councils and accepted creeds were included in the church’s tradition. Our Articles of Religion (XXXIV) took a middle of the road stance – how Anglican of us to be the *via media* from the very beginning – accepting the authority of tradition as long as they were not “repugnant to the Word of God, and ordained and approved by common authority.”<sup>3</sup>

In Anglican thought, reason “interprets scripture and tradition, and allows itself to be corrected and enlarged by them.”<sup>4</sup> Now reason, in this context, is much more than calculation and logic because it draws upon the “entirety of human understanding and experience.”<sup>5</sup> We expect to engage Scripture and the traditions of the church, using all of our being, but most especially our cognitive selves.<sup>6</sup>

We need to appreciate the balance required to be an Episcopalian. At ordination, all bishops, priests, and deacons solemnly declare that they “believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.” In my belief system as a young person, I thought of the threefold sources of authority – scripture, tradition, and reason – as a tri-cycle, with scripture being the big wheel in the front, the guiding wheel for tradition and reason. But I have come to understand the wisdom of the 16<sup>th</sup> century priest and noted theologian Richard Hooker’s three-legged stool as a description of Anglican faith.<sup>7</sup>

Scripture is the source of God's revelation – of God revealing Godself to us – but also the source of all Christian teaching and reflection. But tradition passes down from generation to generation the church's ongoing experience of God's presence and activity. And reason is necessary – no, reason is vital – for us to discern the truth. Some opponents of the *via media*, the middle way, might say that balance of scripture, tradition, and reason as authoritative in the church is clumsy, but only if one leg is missing or out of balance. We Episcopalians – we Anglicans – seek the mean between the extremes. That is the hallmark of who we are. If we do not embrace ambiguity, we certainly accept it. At our best we are much more than tolerant; we try our best to understand opposing viewpoints instead of imposing some version of orthodoxy upon others.

We are people steeped in tradition, not unlike the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish authorities – the Pharisees and Sadducees in that regard. Christ Jesus had come to reveal God's love more fully and that required a change in the traditions of Judaism. The prominent Jews of our Lord's time, the chief priests and elders – the Sadducees – had very very traditional understanding of Scripture, and they were unlikely to embrace a new tradition. They recognized Jesus as a teacher, but they wanted to know where he got the authority to speak in the synagogue. Where did he get all this? We know that his authority came from God because he was the Son of God, but Jesus could not reveal that – yet. Key word YET. He had much work to do before he revealed who he was. So, as he often did, Jesus countered the question of the Jewish authorities with a question of his own. They were in a dilemma, because any answer would have put their authority in question. So they answered: we do not know. Lame answer? But any answer would have revealed the gaps in their theology.

So Jesus did not tell them from where or whom his authority came. But he did teach them a most needed lesson. And this parable was crystal clear to listeners then and now. The Jewish leaders are the people who said they would obey God and then did not. The tax-gatherers and the harlots are those who said that they would go their own way and then took God's way. Neither were perfect. And of the two sorts of people, we would like to be the third, the ones whose promises and practice match. What we profess can never

take the place of performance. The Sadducees with all their fine words about how much they followed God's ways could not replace doing God's will. Just as Christians cannot replace obedience with false courtesy, however lovely we think we are in our devotion to how we worship, how we dress for church, whether our priests wear the right color of the season. Or whether we profess to love all people and yet care for ourselves while we leave others out in the cold and the hot sun? Really, does it matter so much as how what we promise to believe parlays into how we live? Do we love people who differ from us? Where did I get all this? Hmmm....

Who gave Jesus the authority to speak on behalf of God? The Pharisees and Sadducees were troubled about Jesus's ability to speak with such authority. And the Episcopal Church today, indeed all Christians either are or should or will be asking the same question. Where does authority lie in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Answer should be Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Period. Full Stop!

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Pharisees, they denied life after death. They insisted that the doctrine of life after death could not be proved in the the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Pharisees countered that the Old Testament testified to life after death. Numbers 18:28 which says, "You shall give the Lord's offering to Aaron the priest." That is permanent regulation; the verb is in the present tense; therefore Aaron is still alive! They cited Deuteronomy 31:16 : "This people will rise," a peculiarly unconvincing citation, for the second half of the verse goes on, "and play the harlot after the strange gods of the land"! They cited Deuteronomy 32:39 : "I kill and I make alive." Outside the Pentateuch they cited Isaiah 26:19 : "Thy dead shall live." (See William Barclay on Matthew. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/matthew-22.html>.)

<sup>2</sup> An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, Editors, p. 524.

<sup>3</sup> Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles found in the ECUSA BCP, p. 868.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Scripture is highly regarded in the church. For Christians the canon of the Bible – the list of the books to be included in the Bible – was not set until 367CE (AD). The Hebrew Bible canon was not closed until around 200CE (AD) – it is thought that the Torah (the first 5 books or the Pentateuch) had been set around 400 BCE(BC), the Prophets around 200 BCE(BC), and the Writings around 100 CE(AD). These books of the Hebrew Bible

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are found in the Old Testament of our Bible. The books in our Apocrypha were written by people of the Old Testament and are to be read “for examples of life and instruction of manners” but not to establish doctrine.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE (AD), Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria first adopted the 27 books of the canon of the New Testament. However, the canons were then adopted at a number of historic councils over the centuries. In the Roman Catholic world the final articulation of the fixed interpreted books in the Canon of Trent in 1546. For Anglicans it was in the adoption of the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1563. For Calvinists it was the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647. For the Greek Orthodox it was the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672. Interestingly, the fourth Gospel, from which this narrative of the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus only appears, was not included by some. The Gospel of John and the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Peter were not accepted as part of the Canon as determined by apostolic authorship or attribution and widespread acceptance as scripture for a long time. But they now are part of our Canon.

<sup>7</sup> When “where is the authority” was a big question in the church, Richard Hooker interacted with leading Roman Catholics who relied on scripture and tradition alone and Calvinist Puritans whose literal interpretation of scripture was so strict that they considered anything not commanded by scripture as unlawful. At this pivotal moment in the Church 500 years ago, Richard Hooker recognized the absolute authority of scripture where it spoke plainly. But reason had to be used in reading scripture. And where scripture was silent or ambiguous then the tradition of the church must be consulted. To him – and to me and most Episcopalians – the church, is reformed, yes, and it is also in continuity with historic Christianity. But the church is not static but rather an organic institution that must change in accordance with circumstances. See fn. 1, p. 253-254.