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“He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:29).

*2 Kgs 24:8-17; Matt 7:21-29*

Today’s Gospel is often seen as a critique of those who talk the talk but do not walk the walk. It is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, but if we read it carefully, we realize that it is addressed not to his contemporaries but to Christian ministers in Matthew’s church in Antioch two generations later who claimed they were doing everything Jesus had done – preaching, exorcising demons and working miracles and prophesying in his name – yet still lacked an authentic foundation.

The parable of the house built on sand instead of rock is applied to them because, despite their public roles and ministries, they were not doing the will of the Father and therefore were not recognizable as disciples of Jesus. This difficult Gospel raises the possibility that public church figures with all the training and trappings of authority --like the vaunted scribes of Jesus’ time-- are sometimes still not speaking with the authority of Jesus.

I recall a bold homily many years ago that raised the question in a simple but stunning way. The homilist said that the history of the church illustrated both the freedom of the Holy Spirit to give charisms without offices and the freedom of the church to give offices without charisms. In other words, many men and women, both inside and outside the church, possess profound spiritual gifts without any official positions, while some bishops and priests hold high offices but lack spiritual gifts. Ordination and elevation may or may not guarantee apparent spiritual authenticity.

What does spiritual authenticity look like? Today's Gospel says that only those who do God's will are disciples of Jesus. The rock on which the church is built is this commitment to the will of God, manifested in both word and action, personal character and public witness. Everything else, no matter how impressive or dramatic, is sand that can be washed away by the next storm.

It is not advisable to try to match this imagery with headlines in today's church, and it is always dangerous to judge the motives of any authority figure without context and empathy. What is worth emphasizing is how utterly human the church is at all levels and how tension and even conflict are part of the dynamic life of the Spirit and the way the church grows, changes and moves forward in history.

The truth is that the church and all its members are conversion stories and works in progress. Conservatives become liberals and radicals become traditionalists. What matters is that we all do the will of God as we know it. And if we can do it together, side by side, with respect and love, the church will be built on a rock that will always endure. In the words of an old hymn, slightly edited:

*No storm can shake our inmost calm, while to that rock we're clinging.*

*Since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?*

If this sentiment seems relevant to current need and you would like to immerse yourself in it in a beautiful way, here are two links, one to a rendition by Audrey Assad, and the other by the NYC Virtual Choir and Orchestra.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLPP3XmYxXg>

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