

The Rector's Sermon

Sunday 4th July 2021

'If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.'

Today's gospel reading describes Jesus going to the temple to pray on the Sabbath. He stands up and begins to read the words of Isaiah, and before we know it, his people are whispering and questioning not only his authority but also his wisdom.

Notice Jesus does not argue with them but instead makes a statement that we can all identify with. For those closest to us are often the ones who have the most difficulty seeing beyond our person, our relationships, or our status; whereas it is often those who barely know us who tend to be struck by what they hear or see in us. Sometimes those closest to us can only see the box they have painted us into, while those who see only what they actually see in that moment see so much more, they are able to see God's power working in us and through us.

Our lives today are filled with people telling us what we should think and who we should listen to. With the advent of social media, it is so much easier for us to be misled by individuals who cannot wait to tell us about their own importance. Often those who have power over us would have us believe that humility is a sign of weakness, and weakness is not usually something we strive toward.

Strength, both within our church and secular world, is associated with power, and power is not only desired but celebrated and sought after in this world of ours. There is power expressed in our ability to pay our mortgage or rent, to pay our utility bills and buy groceries. There is power in the language we speak as we communicate our thoughts and ideas to others.

Power might also be perceived in the boastful claims of those who would say that only they have insight into what God intends in our lives. And sometimes power can distort our vision and convince us that we know best who exercises power most profitably and for the best end.

So, this morning I wish to explore briefly how Jesus and St Paul expresses power, for the Christian gospel subverts power and challenges those perceptions.

But before I do, here are a few quotes on power that might get us thinking:

"The struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Milan Kundera

"The direct use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations." David Friedman

"You can make a throne of bayonets, but you can't sit on it for long." Boris Yeltsin

"An undefended leader is a person with a magnet in their heart and a compass in their head." Vance Hainer.

"Only they who have measured the dominion of force, and know how not to respect it, are capable of love and justice." Simone Weil

So, what do we note about how Jesus executes power? The power that God gave to Jesus was invisible to his own people. And yet, Jesus did not become boastful and lay out for them all the miracles he had performed. It was not a case of 'look at me, look at me'. Instead, he shook the dust from of his feet and moved on.

So here are some key characteristics of Jesus' ministry for us to ponder:

He kept it simple, being fully dependent on God to provide.

He survived on goodwill, not ever expecting to be recognised or to personally profit from his efforts. He exercised humility. He utterly disassociated from rejection. He was what today we would call an undefended leader.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus was not in any way seeking attention. He was simply observing the Sabbath in the tradition of his hometown. He was not healing the great multitudes as he had been. He only laid his hands on a few, curing them. And he was amazed at their lack of belief. Instead, he named the elephant in the room, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometowns.'

Paul experienced a similar reaction from the people in Corinth. He became aware that they were not only questioning his leadership but also his motives. Paul does not shy away from their charge, but meets it head on, questioning his own motives and leadership publicly in this very straightforward and transparent letter. He admits that he has been weak, but he points out that there is power in weakness and improving the work of a disciple of Christ.

In both cases the communities remain unwilling to receive anything Jesus or Paul might offer. The communities are so busy judging the package that they miss the most essential part, that which could bring them closer to God.

Paul tells us that he was given a thorn in his side to keep him from being too elated or too boastful. He explains that this thorn keeps him from claiming the gifts of the Holy Spirit as his own creation or making him seem too important.

Have we ever had a thorn? If we have, it is very hard to ignore it. It is always there until it works itself out or until we take it out. In Paul's life, a thorn kept him humble. Whatever our thorn is, maybe it is a gift that keeps us humble and opens up a space where God's power can shine through.

Power, God's power, is seen through our humility when boastfulness has not filled up the space. When God's power is allowed to shine through us, all can see and experience it. We know those moments. We have experienced them in our lives. Humility is the secret ingredient in this wonderful recipe of living as our Creator intended. It is that simple.

It is a radical idea to see humility as the source of true strength and power. This kind of strength and power is exemplified in the person and life of Christ, and it gives us a new perspective on how we might envision ourselves and our ministry in the church.

This coming week the General Synod is taking place over four days on zoom – Oh the joys. As a member of General Synod I will have another opportunity to see God at work within the Church. I will have many opportunities to hear how God has transformed people, communities, and the church through simple acts of humility and compassion. I might even see God in action in our lives as the Synod focuses on the mission of the church. Here's hoping!

And yet there will be equal opportunities for boastfulness and for those with agendas seeking power, not for the good of the whole but for a few. There will be opportunities for members of General Synod, myself included, to retreat into tribes, their chosen bubbles, where they may feel safe surrounded by those who agree with them but will do very little in enabling us to become the Body of Christ.

Please pray for the General Synod this week, and please pray continue to for our PCC, Deanery and Diocesan Synods, that we may be voices of hope, powered by the Holy Spirit, bringing forth the work of God so that it may be heard at all levels of the church and will be so supported, that all who seek to be beacons of the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, do not find themselves dusting the sand off their feet as a testimony to our lack of belief or our fear of the power that comes from God.

To conclude, here is a Franciscan Benediction to keep in mind as we strive to mirror God's immeasurable love, generosity and hospitality.

May God bless us with discomfort
at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships,
so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that we may work for economic justice for all people.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer
from pain, hunger, homelessness, and rejection,
so that we may reach out our hand to comfort them
and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness
to believe that we can make a difference in the world
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen