



13 November 2016
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Jeremiah 31 vv. 31–34
Luke 22 vv. 14–23

Diplomatic Power

By Francis Campbell

Vice-Chancellor, St Mary's University, Twickenham

2016 is likely to go down in history as a year of shifting political paradigms. 2017 may yet hold even more dramatic shifts and swings. Who knows? All we can say for certain at this time is that these shifts in power and relations are creating high degrees of uncertainty politically, economically, socially and indeed diplomatically.

Our temporal world does not like uncertainty. It craves certainty. The uncertainty is producing attempts at certainty and some of it perhaps should be treated with as much credibility as a pollster trying to predict an election or referendum result.

But yet our world, and its relations, needs a high degree of certainty to function. Just as we in our day to day human relations rely on certainty to lead to predictability and trust, so when our world sees a dramatic shift in political power from one perspective to another, or when a Treaty which has formed the basis of economic and political stability in recent decades, is rejected by a majority of the population, then the old power certainties are in flux. It is into that flux that many of us step asking what is happening and what is likely to happen.

I'm sure the College dining hall has seen many interesting exchanges in recent months. The historians among you might find a parallel in 1848; others may see the re-emergence of hard powers intent on dismantling the post-world war II multi-lateral order and a return to the century of balancing Great Powers with their spheres of influence. A frightening thought, especially when we remember the sacrifice of so many on this Remembrance Sunday. For social scientists or economists it might be a period of de-globalization fuelled by the reaction to the financial crisis. Perhaps a parallel to the 1929 crash and the ensuing economic and political instability in the years following. But whether we analyze our present as historians, scientists, social scientists, philosophers or theologians, we will still have to come back to the basic question of what is power, who now holds it and what will they do with it? Much of the musing about our present situation simply focuses on the last part of the question 'what will they do with it?'

However, as Christians we must start with the first two questions. Our contextualization of power must start with our faith and its traditions and the wisdom contained therein. For if we rush to grapple too quickly with what someone might do with power, without first determining what it is and who holds it, then we run the risk of compounding the uncertainty and contributing to a growing unease, if not fear.

In tonight's scripture readings we see that same human fear and uncertainty. True power, that is God's power does not always look like what we might expect, and is not always recognizable as power. In our first lesson from Jeremiah 31:31, God promises a 'new covenant' to Israel. In the second lesson taken from Luke, Jesus claims during the Last Supper that the "new covenant" will be actualized in his blood on the cross. In both cases, those who heard this message were uncertain because of what they could then see around them at that time.

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At first glance these two texts have little to do with power, as their focus is on the covenant between God and his people. Yet they actually have everything to do with power because it was precisely the covenant that raises the question of whether God did, indeed, have any power.

Jeremiah writes to a context where God's people are in exile, where they would have to question from the shores of Babylon why, if their God is the one true God, the only God, why is it that Babylon has its foot on their throat? It is within this context of trauma, displacement, violence, and desperation that God promises a "new covenant" to Israel.

The context in Jeremiah later states that this covenant will not involve God's punishment of Israel for its idolatry (the cause of the exile in the first place according to this narrative) but forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:34). Thus, in the midst of the inevitable question of "Who has power here, the gods of Babylon or the god of Israel?" YHWH answers that he is, in fact in control, has plans for them to prosper (Jer 29:11), and will in due course establish with them a covenant where they will once again experience him as their God and experience his forgiveness. Thus, the question of "Where are you God?" is prompted by the assumption that he's not in control; the answer states that he is, in fact, in control, even if it doesn't look like it right now.

Power in this sense does not change, it is how it is presented. Power is still the ability to alter the course of events through actions or thoughts and to alter the context in which those events play out.

Luke, in the New Testament, returns to the promise of power in Jeremiah claims that this new covenant, which brings forgiveness of sins, occurs through Jesus' blood at the crucifixion. Again, although seemingly this has to do only with the covenant, this statement is made in a context in which God's power, and Jesus' power, would unquestionably have been doubted. Crucifixion for all intents and purposes was not really about death. If Rome wanted someone dead, they'd just stab them and they'd die. Crucifixion was a political statement about who's really in control; Jesus' crucifixion with the title of "King of the Jews" was a sarcastic mocking of the claim— "Here's what Rome does with the King of the Jews."

Thus, according to Luke, drawing upon Jeremiah, the very moment in which Jesus and God look like they have the least power, and things seem most uncertain from the perspective of the world, is also when Jesus and God are keeping a promise that was made to Abraham in Gen 17, questioned by the exiles and re-affirmed by Jeremiah in Jer 31, and questioned by other Jews at various times and places (such as the author of the Psalms of Solomon, ca. 100 BCE). More directly, the cross is when God demonstrates his complete power, his power to execute his divine will and his love for his people even in the midst of temporal circumstances that look quite to the contrary of those realities.

So in these most uncertain of days and times when we are witnessing shifts away from old certainties and familiarities, we might reflect as Christians, that true power sometimes does not always look like what we might expect it to be. We might ask, what is the foundation of our certainties? Is it that which is temporal and passing and increasingly the 'quick and the instant', or do we seek insight and perspective from the wisdom of our faith? For those of us who profess a belief in Christ's redemptive power, it's a sharp reminder that we place our trust and hope not in Power itself, but in the One who wields it in its strongest form.

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If we look to the wisdom of our faith as handed on through the sacred scriptures and tradition, then we can see how those before us grappled with the difference between what they perceived and what was really real. We can approach today's temporal and passing uncertainties, not lacking hope, but with a confidence capable of making a substantial contribution to the questions of our time and thereby responding to some of the issues of our age; what is power, where does it rest and what should be done with it?