



16 October 2016  
The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
2 Samuel 23 vv. 1–5  
Ephesians 1 vv. 15–23

## **The Power of the Church?**

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Words from Ephesians: “God hath put all things under his feet, and gave Christ to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.” May I speak in the name of one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week an old news story briefly flickered back into our headlines. About twenty young women who had been kidnapped for their school in northern Nigeria two and a half years ago have been released. Perhaps you remember the original story. In April 2014, somewhere between two and three hundred young women were kidnapped from a school in the community of Chibok in northeastern Nigeria. You might remember the widespread social media campaign under the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. People called for military intervention, perhaps a commando raid to free the young women or a full-on campaign to defeat the insurgent movement behind the kidnapping. The ideal of Bringing Back Our Girls seemed so obvious, so urgent, so important.

But as the BringBackOurGirls campaign gained steam, it became clear that the situation was more complex than it appeared. After the last decade and a half, there is little appetite for western military intervention in predominantly Muslim parts of the world, no matter how well-intentioned. It turns out that the Nigerian military is corrupt verging on incompetent and has been deeply implicated in massacres and human rights violations of its own in northern Nigeria. Most of all, it is not clear that there is a simple military solution; the quick-in, quick-out hostage-rescue mission is a thing of the movies. The reality, it turns out, is a quite a good deal messier than the ideal.

Ideals and reality—these are the forces that shape our lives, the one offering us hope and expectations for the future, the other describing the constraints of the world we actually live in. And in this gap between ideal and reality we are not alone. The first reading we heard this evening expresses an ideal that was not, sadly, achieved in life. We have what is presented as the last words of King David, the slayer of Goliath and great king of a united Israel. In these words reputedly on his death bed, David refers to himself as the one who ruled over the people justly, ruled in the fear of God, and was, in an evocative phrase, “as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain.” That might be nice as poetry, but as historical fact it leaves a lot to be desired. David is the one who impregnated the wife of one of his senior military commanders. Rather than confess, he sent the military commander to the front line of battle where he was killed so David could move in on his wife. David is the one whose children rose up in rebellion against him. David is the one who initiated a census of Israel, not from some desire to know how many people he ruled but so that he could properly draft them for military service. True, David did a lot of fine things as well. But what we are given in this reading this evening is an ideal that does not match the complicated reality. We find that reality if we flip just a few chapters further in the Bible. In the book of 1 Kings, there is a scene of David on his death bed, only this time he is telling his chosen son, Solomon, to be sure he kills several of David’s enemies. In a line that could come from a movie, he says: “do not let their grey heads go down to the grave in peace.” This is the brutal reality of what it means to be a king, far from the ideal of a figure as fresh and vigorous as new grass springing out of the earth.

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This distinction between ideal and reality continues in our second reading as well. The Book of Ephesians in the New Testament is a general letter to the church in Ephesus—and possibly beyond—offering them some general advice about how to live as Christians. In this portion that we heard this evening, the Apostle Paul is offering this grand vision of what it means to be a Christian. I have heard of your faith and love toward all Christians, he begins. I hope you may know the rich hope to which God has called you. After all, Paul says, God has raised Christ from the dead. This is power. And that same immeasurable greatness and power made known in the resurrection has been given to his followers and is found in “the church, which is Christ’s body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Excuse me? The immeasurable greatness and power of God is found in the church? You mean that institution that has, by turns, been—and continues to be—racist, classist, anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, homophobic, misogynistic and militaristic? You mean the institution that was behind the Crusades and the Inquisition, that stood in the way of the labour movement and continues to obstruct social progress today? And all of this overseen by a bunch of, dare we say it, bumbling, fumbling, fallible clergy of doubtful competency. Here in the letter to the Ephesians we have this description of a transcendent church, the body of Christ, the fullness of God’s power and greatness. And yet we know the reality has been—and continues to be—a long way from this ideal.

It is very easy to point out this gap between ideal and reality and in no place more easily perhaps than in the church. People have made whole careers out of pointing out the gap between ideal and reality in the church and its leaders and accusing it and all involved of hypocrisy. But it’s not just in the church. It happens in our politics, in business, in our social relations. As the challenges to Bringing Back Our Girls have become apparent, the momentum behind the movement has waned. As some of these young women have been able to return home, the news occasionally flickers across our screens but not nearly with the same energy or passion the issue—when it was simply an ideal—generated. If we couldn’t Bring Back Our Girls right now, then why bother paying attention? Pretty soon we have ended up in a familiar place—cynicism and detachment. Maybe we’re not hypocritical, but neither are we involved. Yet there actually are problems in this world that need to be addressed. Young women all over the world need to be—and deserve to be—educated in peace. We actually do want to create a world which is peaceful, truthful, and merciful. Cynicism and detachment just don’t seem to get us there.

And that brings us back to the church and, in fact, to northern Nigeria. A few years ago, I spent time in a place called Yola, a Nigerian community not far south from the now-infamous Chibok. My host was the irrepressibly eager young Anglican bishop of Yola, Markus Ibrahim. Markus was working on several projects for his diocese, but he particularly wanted me to see the new diocesan secondary school. “Jesse,” he told me, as he showed me around, “there is no place in this entire state that offers co-educational instruction in English. But we think both boys and girls need to learn, they need to learn together, and they need to learn in English.” In the environment of northern Nigeria, co-educational English-language education is an impressive ideal.



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Unfortunately, the reality fell somewhat sort of the ideal. When I visited, the students met in a rented house, in which bedrooms had been turned into cramped classrooms. I conducted an assembly with sixty students crammed into a tiny room. The church was trying to build a bigger campus on a larger site but was struggling to find the money to purchase the necessary materials. Bishop Markus took me out to the site and showed me the classroom buildings they had managed to put up but then took me over to the foundation of the dormitory where the students would live. They had managed to dig a hole in the ground and line it in bricks but had run out of money after that. The members of the church in the region continued to do their best to slowly raise money while the scores of talented students continued to labour in the cramped quarters of their house. As so often, the reality failed to match the ideal.

Our response to #BringBackOurGirls and my experience with Bishop Markus left me thinking about power in the midst of our ideals and realities. In our society, we want to believe we have the power to #BringBackOurGirls but it turns out to be a lot harder than we think. We lack the power to do what we want to do. St. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, talks about how God's power is made manifest in the church. But Bishop Markus would seem not to have much power at all. He wants to build a school but boys and girls are still sitting in a cramped house.

The power of the church is not the church's ability to get things done or even to do the right thing all the time. Instead, the power of the church is its ability to live truthfully in this place where ideal meets reality. The members of Bishop Markus' church see the importance of the ideal of co-educational, English-language education—and they wrestle with the reality that they can only imperfectly provide it. This is basically what it means to be a Christian: to understand on the one hand the fullness and richness of the life to which God calls each one of us and to recognize on the other hand our inability to live that life. Even as Paul in this letter to the Ephesians calls the church the body of Christ, he is perfectly well aware that the body of Christ is a broken, crucified, and weak body. Indeed, the life of Christ is perhaps the greatest example of ideal not meeting reality in the world. The Son of God, the promised Messiah, comes to earth in human form, the long-awaited ideal—and the world puts him to death, the brutal reality.

The church takes its power from living in this gap. In rising from the dead, Christ testifies to the fact that there is more to the world than the difficult reality we encounter and holds before us an ideal of new and full life. The Christian life is the life that is lived in this in-between space. Christians constantly hold before the world this ideal of new life, new hope, and new relationship. But Christians also frankly acknowledge the reality of death, destruction, and despair. In the Eucharist, Christians hold forth the ideal of a loving, forgiving, gracious God—but also confess the reality of our sins that impede this ideal. In this service of Evensong, we pray for God's kingdom to come—but also ask God to have mercy on us for the ways we have obstructed this kingdom. In Bishop Markus' diocese in northern Nigeria, Christians hold up the ideal of co-educational, English-language education—but live in the messy reality of providing that. Living in this way is more powerful than any cynicism or detachment. It's more effective than any unsustainable military approach. The church's power is simply the power to live in the midst of the reality of the world while also holding on to the vision of a greater, more transcendent ideal for which we continue to strive.



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And at the end of the day, this is why I continue—against all odds—to find hope in the church. The church doesn't know how to #BringBackOurGirls. Its public stumbles are well known. But I find in the church an answer that moves beyond cynicism and disengagement. I find in the church a way to live in this messy gap between our ideals and realities. Most of all, I find in the church a way to see the greatness and power of God at work in the world and learn time and again that new hope can always come from even the most difficult reality.

Amen.