



9 October 2016
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 11 vv. 1–9
John 17 vv. 1–10, 20–24

Power & Glory **Christian meditations in an unsettling world: Being human**

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'What is the first thing that comes to mind when I mention the word 'power'". I asked a young woman this question and without a pause she replied that it reminded her of unpleasant experiences – times when individuals had exerted power in a negative manner to achieve their own ends. She continued - expressing the hope that individuals could learn to share power *and* also her acceptance that the exercise of power was a necessary part of being human. Somebody had to take responsibility; someone (if you like) had to be in charge. Yet she qualified this by adding that power should enable humans; not stifle, control or harm them. I found her response so immediate, so striking, that I went on to offer the same question to other people, taking note of their thoughts about the use and abuse of power.

That word 'power' conjured up differing images and reactions. Power was mainly about physical strength for some. Or it enabled one to achieve something, often for good. For others it had extra layers of subtlety – they enquired about context – who was wielding the power? What was the status of the individuals involved? I was asked by one person to provide a scenario in which power was being deployed so that the power *balance* could be fully ascertained and a response formulated.

I offer you these 'vignettes' because I believe we must begin by facing the contested nature of power in our world. Used positively, power can be a great 'enabler', and in a world where we are bombarded by twenty four hour news, much of which is negative and depressing, it is vital that we hold fast to the hope that human beings are capable of great kindness and mercy towards each other. On a global scale if we can harness the power of wealth, position or prestige we can affect great good in the world. With this positive use of power it has been possible to muster aid for refugees, for areas of the world affected by natural disaster, even for individual cases whose plight has been highlighted by the world media.

Yet alongside this we must also face the widespread *misuse* of power in our world, from the international and institutional to the domestic. From corrupt governments siphoning the precious aid sent to their countries, through to domestic violence and controlling behaviour in the home environment, there are millions of individuals, male and female, young and old, who live in poverty and fear because of the abuse of power.

To suffer in this way is to experience, I believe, what one writer described as 'affliction', a state in which there is not only pain or physical distress but also humiliation, 'social degradation' and fear. She likened 'affliction' to slavery (perhaps the ultimate unequal human relationship) because it 'takes possession of the soul'. She also remarked that humiliation such as this is akin to having a 'poison of inertia' injected into the soul because the one who is afflicted may struggle to seek help. They may be paralysed by fear and self-loathing making it impossible for them to escape their situation:-



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If we view the abuse of power as something akin to slavery, that it de-humanises the person so that they live, if you will, a half-life—then we beg the question of what it looks like when we *live fully*. Every human being is in relationship of some sort, regardless of how introverted we might be, no matter how much we might like our own company. We are born into a human family and live in societies where we must interact with each other. Unless we choose the life of a hermit our daily lives will be peppered with interactions with other human beings in various settings and contexts. In each of these interactions power will play a role. How we, as individuals, exercise power will again depend on context, personality, previous experiences, values or upbringing.

The Church believes that humans were created to live in relation. And to live fully, to honour the humanity of every individual that we meet, requires a specific approach to the concept of power. Christians are called to see the image of God in every human being they meet, to treat others as they would like to be treated themselves, and above all, to love one another. This is not always an easy task. Human beings have their faults and failings and there is bound to be the inevitable personality clash – but at the core of Christian teaching is the concept of love for one another. And at the core of the concept of love lies relationship.

This is because love requires an object; when we talk about love we inevitably talk about loving someone or something. Love turns outwards, away from ourselves and towards the object of its desire. Love is not something that we squirrel away and keep for ourselves, because the nature of love is to give. Love does not wield power over the beloved; instead it enables and gives of itself to the other. The beauty of Love is that we want to share it, and it is worth asking ourselves why this is the case.

In God we encounter perfect love – that which exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit - in the relationship of love that Christians call the Trinity. As one writer reminds us: "All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that 'God is love'. But they seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person'.

This relationship of love called the Trinity is our template for all relationships because it is the first relationship, made of love and perfectly equal. It consists of total self-giving; the Father gives all to the Son who returns it to the Father through the Spirit. Our vocation is to imitate the perfection of the Trinity but this is a real challenge, because we live in a world in which human relationships are unequal. Indeed it might be objected that it is foolish to encourage the imitation of God, which could only ever be a counsel of perfection, and whose relationship with human beings is infinitely asymmetrical. God is - after all – God, and we are human beings with all our faults and failings. But if we look at how God exercises power in relation to those whom he loves we see just how we should act, how we should live. Because (in the words of the Collect for the eleventh Sunday after Trinity) God declares his 'almighty power, most chiefly in showing mercy and pity'.

If we can learn to exercise power with mercy and pity then we will not only be living lives which are conformed to the will of God - through the pattern of the Trinitarian life - but we will ensure that no human being is isolated, or down trodden, that power is equally shared and never abusive.



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Furthermore, if we conform our lives to the will of God, and live lives of mercy and pity we will be ‘made partakers’ of the heavenly life. Hear again the words of Jesus: *‘And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one’*. This is the glory that exists in the life of the Trinity, and we humans are invited to partake in that glory. Partaking in the divine nature, in the life of the Trinity, means that we are known by God and in relationship with other human beings at a profound level. As the Church Father said *‘the glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God’*. Man fully alive. Or as we might say - human beings living fully - this is a pattern of living which is oriented towards God.

We are human beings; power will always challenge us. But it is also our great *opportunity* to demonstrate that gift of love towards one another – to be in relationship with each other as God is in relationship with God’s self. Our human calling is to be fully alive to God and to each other, to imitate that most perfect of relationships, to exercise power with mercy and pity. Human beings are beloved in God’s sight and this love sets us free to love others. We are called to use our power self-emptyingly — and for good — because pity and mercy are the disciplines which reveal God’s glory and the method by which we prepare to partake of it.