

Joshua 3:7-17; Matthew 23:1-12

05.11.17

### *The Corruption of Power*

It's all about power. A well-known Hollywood producer, disgraced and brought low by a flurry of allegations; and now names of actors and agents and executives are pouring out in a flood of accusations; and in the United Kingdom the scandal has spread to politics, as government ministers and MPs and activists are being outed with reports of all manner of indiscretion. And of course, inevitably, all the accused are male, because when it comes to power we still, overwhelmingly, live in a male world. And all this helps to breed resentment against the powerful and those who are considered to be elites, a feature of this year's election in the USA. There resentment against what was seen as an elite political class, crooked and corrupt, and out of touch with the harsh realities of everyday life, gave vent to a huge vote for change. Power gave way to populism, a demand that the voices from the grass roots be heard. And part of the context of all that was great financial crash of 2008 where taxpayers were seen as having paid the price for the arrogance and misdemeanours of the bankers. And suddenly the world becomes a very unpredictable place, politics a frighteningly unpredictable game when people lose all respect for those in power.

Many would see this as the culmination of a trend that goes back in recent times to the '60s, when many of the great institutions that presided over society were seen to have feet of clay, rocked as they were by scandals and mocked as they were by satirists. Some of you may remember Saturday nights in the '60s when right here on the Spui what were called 'happenings' took place, part of the Provo movement, and where the establishment was taunted and ridiculed: the government, the church, the police, the monarchy – no-one was safe. And so today suspicion of the powerful, and of elites, and the establishment are stronger than ever and shaping our world in unforeseen ways.

Well, not much has changed since Jesus' day. Then of course religion was a massive part of the establishment and it had its elites and its cliques with all their trappings of power: and Jesus picks out the scribes and the Pharisees with their special seats and the ostentatious fringes on their cloaks and the leather phylacteries on their heads. And as ever the accusation is of hypocrisy, of being hollow and lacking in integrity, enjoying the perks of power while and

all the while burdening and deskilling the people. And Jesus' denunciation is scathing and radical. He looks at these authority figures and he says, 'call no one your father on earth, for you have one father – the one in heaven'! And he goes on to declare that the greatest among you is not the father or the rabbi or the instructor but the one who is your servant, as in Jesus' upside-down realm the humble are exalted and the exalted humbled. And what we discern from Jesus' words and what has been born out abundantly in history is that Christianity always sits uneasily with human power.

Of course this was the story of the Reformation, whose 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary we celebrated this past week. Power corrupts as is often said and the story of the Reformation was the story of the massively powerful institution which the church had become, lording it over society, and the manifold corruptions that had ensued. And Martin Luther protested against the elitism of the priesthood with all its trappings, with its hypocrisy and its deskilling of the laity. And while the Reformation changed things it is arguable that the issues around power were most profoundly confronted in what was known as the Radical Reformation, amongst the Anabaptists and the Mennonites, and those who are commemorated in the stained glass window in our chancel. These were known as Independents and Separatists and for them the Reformation had not gone far enough. They wanted a greater separation of earthly and heavenly power, of church and state.

So to today and we might reflect on the state of the church 500 years after the Reformation. It's hardly the power that it was – far from it – and the processes of secularisation are working away. And we may bemoan that, yet our loss of power and influence is perhaps an opportunity for God to do something new.

Our reading from the Book of Joshua this morning takes us back to the days before Israel was a nation, before it was a power, before faith had become institutionalised and when it was still a movement – a movement of people who had experienced liberation from God and who were now being led by that God into a new place. And that God had previously parted waters to let them through and was now about to do it again. And we look back to those days when God's people were so dependent upon God for survival. Then they were powerless in a world ruled by Pharaohs and powers who neither knew nor cared for their God. Their task was not to rule but simply to bear witness to that God. Their calling was simply to be a place where the truth and the reality of

that God was revealed and celebrated. And 500 years after the Reformation, in our secular age, where power continues so often to corrupt, our calling is the same: to learn what it means to serve rather than to rule, and to bear witness to the one beyond all human fathers and authority figures who alone rules over all through his Son, Jesus Christ. To whom be praise and glory forever. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
We praise you sovereign ruler over all.  
We worship you, in whose hands rest all power and authority.  
And your rule comes to throw all our little kingdoms, all our petty pecking orders into disarray.  
You come in Jesus Christ, who laid aside all power and glory to become a servant;  
You come in Jesus Christ armed only with a basin and a towel, and suddenly the exalted are humbled and the humbled exalted – and you are found among those who have no position or place.  
But God, you keep catching us out, because we keep finding ourselves in the wrong place, with the wrong mind-set.  
Forgive us, God, when we seek the praise and acclaim of others, rather than the quiet assurance that we are loved by you.  
Forgive us, God, when we need to draw attention to ourselves, rather than pointing to you.  
Forgive us God, when acceptance and affirmation by others means more than knowing that we do your will.  
Hear us we confess our sins.

But here is the good news: Christ Jesus came into world to save sinners. So know that you are forgiven and receive grace to live lives patterned by our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
Lord of all,  
we pray for those entrusted with the trappings  
of power and authority.  
We pray for leaders and politicians,  
asking that you would give them integrity  
and vision and a sense of what is right and just  
and the common good.  
We pray for those in authority here in this city  
That they may adopt policies that will enhance  
life for all.

And we pray today for the church,  
as in this part of the world it suffers such  
marginalisation and such a reduction  
in its status in society.  
O God open us doors for us,  
doors of service where we leave behind  
position and standing and take after our Lord and Saviour,  
who laid aside his glory and took up a basin and towel,  
showing what real power and authority look like.  
Bless, we pray, the life of the church here.  
Bless our efforts to serve:  
our work with refugees, and the homeless,  
and our desire to serve and to support one another  
through pastoral care and gatherings like the coffee morning.

And we pray for the Mulanje Mission Hospital today  
And our efforts to support it through our collections  
And in the coming concert.  
Give us grace to serve in these ways,.

We pray for the Consistory meeting this week.  
Guide we pray the elders of our church and enable  
this congregation to be all that it can be,  
using our gifts to your glory.

And Lord, bless we pray all who are troubled  
Or grieving at this time:  
those who have lost loved ones,  
those who are anxious about loved one,  
those who are struggling with ill health,  
those who await to hear the outcomes  
of applications for residency or asylum.  
O God be rock and a strength to all who look to you  
For comfort and for strength.

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We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour  
who humbled himself and became the servant of all. Amen