

Reflection for Sunday 7 March 2021

We don't trust politicians. Even in Britain. A survey 18 months ago showed that 78.1% of the population think that politicians are the least trustworthy professionals, beating journalists at 37.7% by a country mile. This is a shame. In my experience, most people who enter politics do so out of a deep-seated desire to do something for the public good and to make the world a better place for us all. The glaring problem, as we know all too well, is that politicians and leaders have often clung onto power for more self-centred reasons. Power is seductive and addictive.

The church has not generally been ruled by despots quite as extreme as those who led the Roman Empire in Paul's lifetime (read Suetonius's 'Twelve Caesars' for all the racy, stomach-churning details) but as an all-too human institution, we too, have a sometimes disturbingly shabby track record when it comes to exercising power. Who, then, are we to dare to throw stones or to assume the moral high ground?

But power, its nature and its use, is central to our faith. Paul makes this clear in the remarkable passage set for today, from his first letter to the church at Corinth. He doesn't claim that power is wrong, but lays out a wonderful yet deeply challenging alternative vision of what it can and should be - if we have the courage to look to Jesus for inspiration.

Paul's Christ-inspired vision of power is based on the conviction that it should be an enabling force rather than a means of control. It should set people free and not enslave them. It's a vision often that risks distortion because human language always tends to use words that have been so long and so often associated with control and containment rather than liberation, words we even use of God – rule, kingdom, lordship and so on; but Paul insists that Jesus's power is the very opposite of the ideas that these words usually convey.

Paul does not describe the events of Jesus's earthly life. He's always more interested in what it means to know the risen Jesus. But if we look to the Gospel writers we can see Jesus's subversive, liberating power constantly and consistently in action in his many healings and acts of forgiveness that presented people with a new start in life. It's there too in his courageous willingness to break the rules of etiquette and convention by sitting down in acceptance with those whom the powerful of his day despised, and it's there in his teaching, especially in his many illustrations of how human selfishness and greed inoculate us from catching God's love.

But it's the event of the cross that had changed Paul's life and set him free and which provides the clearest and most puzzling example of what Jesus's power is like.

The symbol of the cross is so familiar to us - and so tamed by us (every day, for example, I wear a beautiful and much treasured silver cross given to me by my daughter) that we forget just what a shocking image it would have been to those first Corinthian Christians who eagerly opened Paul's letter. To be crucified was a disgusting fate, reserved for those in utter disgrace. It was regarded as so repellently horrible that in polite society it wasn't even mentioned – only hinted at by the use of a euphemism and a sad shake of the head. The notion that a crucified man could be a demonstration of power was truly preposterous, but that's what God embraced.

To be truthful, the rationale behind this simply doesn't make sense at all when we look at it using everyday logic. The mist only begins to clear if we see it as a demonstration that God is prepared to enter and share fully in our worst nightmares. It is a sign of empathy at its wildest extreme. But if we reflect for a moment that earthly power at its restrictive, controlling worst is shown in a disregard for other people that is evacuated of any empathy – a seeing of other people as objects only to be manipulated for one's benefit, we begin to understand what God is up to on the cross.

As God enters those nightmares with us, a new story begins to emerge in which a new and very different future is possible. There is hope, after all. God's foolishness is indeed wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

We have a new story, which suddenly makes all the difference in the world, one that Paul was determined to tell anyone and everyone who would listen.

Living lovingly in the light of that story is another matter. It's still the greatest challenge we can choose to face. It demands courage and brutal honesty and most of the time, it's beyond us, as history shows all too horribly well. Human notions of power are far easier to comprehend and manipulate to our own ends. But every now and then the new story can inspire us to behave differently even if the immediate consequence of that seems to risk scorn and a complete loss of face.

I was struck this last week by the coverage of the funeral of Captain Sir Tom Moore. He was not, it seems a religious man, and yet the Sunday Mirror could splash a banner headline, that echoed his daughter's words at his funeral: 'His Spirit lives on'. I hope it's true – and I believe it to be so. His selflessness was truly remarkable and I do hope that still more people are inspired by it to acts of generosity. I also pray that the wild, disturbing story of Jesus, will continue to transform lives through its uncompromising empathy. May we believe, with Paul, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, and with as much bravery as we can muster, let's try to live in that hope.