

Power – James and John

It was about 3am, a quiet morning in little Somerset village, out there in the wild west of England. No street lights, no traffic noise, the middle of summer. And because it's the middle of summer, you sleep with the windows open. And because the windows are open, and it is so quiet – you, hear, everything! And on this particular morning, I heard an animal walk across the patio and over towards the rubbish bag outside the back door. So ... I looked out of the window, to see the shape of a rat scurrying around inside the rubbish bag. So – having armed myself with a garden rake, I ventured out... The rat didn't hear me coming – so I managed to make several blows... until it stopped moving. Job done – so I pulled the bag open to have a look – only to discover that my victim was not a rat, but a hedgehog.

Great! So, instead of killing a disgusting, wild animal, riddled with disease and hell-bent on destruction, - I killed a goodie, with a cute face, who may have been a family pet. Nothing at all like a disgusting wild animal, riddled with disease. I have been widely condemned for acting too hastily, and as a result committing an act of gratuitous cruelty.

There is something of this attitude in the Israel of Jesus' day. This was the unofficial foreign policy. We are God's chosen, they – the Gentiles, the Samaritans and especially the Romans, are vermin – to be eliminated or at least subdued when the Kingdom of God comes. James and John are great examples of this attitude. "Sons of Thunder" they were called. And you may remember the incident when Jesus is not welcome in a Samaritan village. James and John are the brothers who approach Jesus and offer to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village! I would love to see the expression on Jesus' face when he heard that one! It was probably similar to the expression on my face when I heard six year old Stefan threaten four year old Alice: "Alice, if you do that again – I am going to hurt you using the power of Jesus!" (They had just spent the weekend with their charismatic grandmother.)

And in the New Testament reading this morning, we hear more about James and John: about their desire to sit on the left and on the right of Jesus when the Kingdom of God comes. It is worth remembering that they were not asking for seats either side of a heavenly throne! They were asking to be Jesus lieutenants – whose lives were totally given up for him. It was not that they were vying for positions of power – so much as positions of responsibility. And Jesus' response is to speak about how power functions.

But, as ever, it is worth remembering context. The kinds of things that Jesus was saying, were not basic instructions to be applied by those in the Whitehouse or Whitehall. Instead, we have to picture the context. Here is a would-be popular leader – with a bunch of followers – out there in the middle of peasant country on an unrealistic 1980s BBC television filming scene. They are a miles away from Rome, from Jerusalem – and they have no power, no influence – nothing. And this Jesus starts to talk about political power.

He says "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." The trouble is, now that Jesus has said that, we have had two thousand years of history to work those concepts of servant leadership into a kind of leadership that is as oppressive as any gentile regime. I was in a church once where I spoke up in a church meeting, against the views of the leadership team. And the sermons that followed were about how it is wrong to disagree with your Servant-leaders!

Jesus says that we should not Lord it over people! And yet, in Britain, if you are a Bishop – then you are a Lord! This debate about power was one that I had opportunity to debate recently with a Bishop with some title from Lord of the Rings. And his argument was that Christians need to get into positions of power so that they can shape the world for good! So it is important to have Christians in positions of power!

And I suppose the question that leaves me with is ... why? Why do you need power before you can live responsibly! Because it certainly seems true – as is frequently pointed out – that power corrupts. So you have to use power for good and not for evil. And we all know, that with great power comes great responsibility! Do you know who said that? With great power comes great responsibility! It was Spiderman. But it's not true! If you have great power, if you gain great power – then you get to define what counts as responsible behaviour!

Or do we think that when Hitler became chancellor of Germany, that he thought – aha – at last, I can use my power irresponsibly and corruptly. Aha. The trouble is, that if you are the kind of person that has fought to gain power, then that fight makes you a certain type of person, with a certain understanding of what responsible behaviour is! We see this with the Goldman report on the war crimes committed in the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Israel have wielded enormous power and influence in the world, despite the claims that anyone who stands against them is anti-Semitic. And a report is published about war crimes, highlighting irresponsible behaviour of one nation against another. And what is the response of the powerful nation to this report! That it ignores a nation's right to defend itself against terrorists! Despite the fact that the report criticises Hamas as well as Israel. Although it is worth mentioning that Hamas did kill thirteen people, three of them being civilians.

On the other hand, Israel killed one thousand four hundred people, most of whom were civilians. Now – for Israel, who had the power to cause destruction and death of that magnitude, also have the power to say that their actions were responsible – and many people will believe them. It was the UN high commissioner for Human Rights who said that Israel's action is surrounded by a "culture of impunity" – we shouldn't have to face any trial for defending ourselves.

With great power – comes the power to define great responsibility. Power is not some neutral thing, that you can fight for, gain, and then make sure that you use your power for good and not for evil. In fact, isn't that one of the insights of Lord of the Rings – that this power is not something that you can use for good.

According to Jesus, this idea that you need power to be responsible is a Gentile Idea that has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. Instead, in Jesus we hear that anyone that wants to be great – has to be the servant of all.

The logic of it seems to turn on its head the belief that with great power comes great responsibility. Instead, it seems to be that with great responsibility comes power. The right power at the right time – if your attitude is one of a servant, one of taking responsibility for another.

And I think this is something that we have witnessed at Bloomsbury in some of our work with homeless people. We hear that the Corporation of London are using their power irresponsibly – waking homeless people in the middle of the night, beyond the gaze of the public eye, and

bullying them off the street under the pretence that they just need to clean the six feet of street where the homeless people were sleeping. At Bloomsbury, we did not attempt to go off and gain power. We simply joined homeless friends on the street, and listened. And it was the charity, Broadway that got in touch with us. It was the city Police who called us. It was the Corporation of London that invited us to meet with them.

We did nothing to try to orchestrate those things – they came out of the blue. And since, this sense of responsibility to homeless people lay at the heart of our concern – it put us in a position of enormous power when we were confronted by professionals who should have torn us to shreds. But instead, they changed their policy on homeless people. Not through any power that the church had tried to seize. But through listening! Through taking responsibility for other people.

When we do that, then the right kind of power seems to come in tow. Isn't that what Jesus promised? And this is what we see worked out in Jesus' own day. Everyone knew what a Messiah had to do! He is God's appointed instrument to bring justice and peace to the world. Of course he needed power in order to achieve that – didn't he?

And yet, Jesus rejected that path altogether. And in the end, he relinquishes power to the point where he is crucified. And that is the ultimate picture of powerlessness. Real Messiahs do not end up getting crucified by Pagans. At least, that is the view if you believe that you should be exercising power in the way that pagans do. And yet, it seems that the death and resurrection of Jesus vindicate this path of powerlessness.

This is a Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve – and look where that leads. It leads, ultimately for him, to the cross. And yet it is precisely there – that we find the ultimate position of true power. And when James and John ask to be seated at the right and left of Jesus, they have no idea that they are asking to be nailed to the crosses on his right and his left. Because that is the throne where commitment to this Jesus leads. And yet, it seems, that it is precisely from there that the right power comes – and it comes as God's own blessing.

The resurrection of Jesus proves his words to be true. The it is the servant who discovers ultimate power – but not that you can go away and use or misuse. Because that power itself is dependant upon a life of self-sacrifice that makes you a certain type of person. In just the same way that power corrupts, then the path of discipleship cleanses, shapes you into a servant – who will then understand, and encounter and wield power in a completely different way. That's not the kind of power and responsibility that James and John were after at this stage. They were still after the permission to go and hit a rat using a garden rake.

But Jesus says that the son of man, having come not to be served but to served, served to the point, took on responsibility of others to the point where he gives his life as a ransom for many!

Resurrection is God's endorsement of this path to greatness. It is the path, not necessarily of rejecting greatness and glory and enjoyment and power and wealth and fun. It is living as a servant, it is taking on responsibility for others to the point where you discover all of those things in a way that brings life not death to the world.

Whoever conferred the Nobel prize upon Obama seemed to have grasped this. No point giving someone a prize when they can do nothing with it, once they have achieved something

great but no longer have any influence. Instead, to a powerful man, they have given a prize that is more like a curse to the power-hungry. To be given that prize is to be trusted with responsibility first – it places responsibility above power...

That is the way of Jesus. The reading from Job draws our attention to that! If this really is the God that we worship – the one who put the universe together – the one who powers up the lightning strikes and arranges supper for predators – if this God that we worship is the God of power and might – if we get a glimpse of this God that Job has heard – and if we trust the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ – then we can forget about power, get on with serving, and then see what happens. That is the life Jesus invites us into when he says that the greatest among us must become as the least. That, after all, is what he did, and that is how we encounter him today.

And yet – it seems to be that he rejected that altogether. He seemed instead, simply to get on with announcin

he proper use of power. And we all know, if we have watched Spiderman, that with great power, comes great responsibility.