

Good Friday 2011

'Passion and Power'

Introduction

Our Good Friday service today is made up of a series of three similar sections and some concluding prayers.

Its theme is Passion and Power.

A reading from the Passion is then followed by a meditation which looks at various aspects of power – personal power and God's power. Each meditation will be followed by a good period of silence, in which you can either pray your own prayers or reflect and pray about the questions included in the order of service.

After each silence we will say a prayer together and sing a hymn, before moving on to the next section.

The service will end in silence after the concluding prayer.

Meditation 1 'Me – powerful?'

What kind of power do we have?

Power over our money, power over our time, power over where we go and how we spend our lives. That is probably the kind of power that we, gathered here at St Peter's on Good Friday 2011, take for granted. Some of us may reflect that there have been times when we have had a lot more power than we do now – power to make things happen, power to employ and fire people, power to spend large quantities of money, power to contribute to work which made a considerable difference to people's lives. Those that have had that experience may be glad that the responsibility for exercising that power has been lifted from them. They can sleep easier and now relax in retirement as a result. Others here will know that what they do and what they decide in their working lives today has considerable impact on other people. They currently exercise responsibility for people, budgets and decisions which affect people powerfully both positively and negatively.

Pontius Pilate appears in the story of Christ's Trial and Crucifixion as a person with power who reacts to the choices before him in a well remembered way. He 'took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.''

Is Pilate as innocent as he claims? Could he have done more to save Jesus from trial and death? And, disturbingly, are there ways in which we reflect Pilate in our own attitudes and actions? Are we in denial about the opportunities before us to collaborate with God's Spirit in building God's kingdom today?

A particular genius of the Roman Empire was that it exercised power over its varied territories in a special way. It wielded power by manipulating and creating privilege and special favour – in fact, through offering some people convenient and lucrative temptation. Rather than dominate and subjugate entire populations 100% under Roman rule and military might, the Empire's style was to cream off perhaps 5% of the indigenous population and tempt them to be on the Roman side. These people would get significant benefits in relation to three very important social assets: wealth,

prestige and power. Among those in this group who appear in the gospels are tax gatherers like Matthew and Zacchaeus and those whose interests are well served by subservience to or collaboration with the Roman authorities: the half-Jewish Herod Antipas, and the Jewish high priests in the Temple Council or Sanhedrin, among them Caiaphas and Nicodemus.

Because Herod's sons couldn't handle power and prestige well enough for the Romans' satisfaction they had taken to administering Palestine more directly – by installing a governor. It was in this role that we meet Pontius Pilate – since AD 26 Palestine's fifth governor, with a host of local retainers and quislings beneath him.

So the stage is set in Jerusalem in AD 33: in one corner stand the Jerusalem and Temple authorities – apparently manipulating the reins of power but in practice in the pocket of the Roman governor. In another corner is Pilate, doing well out of keeping the status quo and happy to let the Jewish authorities have a visible hand in running the show. It's Passover time in Jerusalem – always a febrile time when Jewish national identity is keenly felt. Onto this stage now enters Jesus of Nazareth. The trouble is his presence is a threat to the Jewish authorities and the Roman overlords alike. He threatens not just the system of patronage and the manipulation of the elite: his call to recognise and implement the radical priorities of the kingship of God threatens not only the Jewish authorities but the Roman governor and Emperor too. His teaching undermined the dominant attitudes to wealth, prestige and power: his followers clearly saw him as a potential king. That was why there would inevitably be a clash when Pilate and Jesus came face to face.

With this picture both of tangled personal relationships and Jesus' reflection of ultimate truth as a backdrop, let's focus in on Pilate's most famous activity – washing his hands.

Pilate wants the crowd to believe that Jesus' death is no responsibility of his. But this, I suggest, is a charade. He is the governor. He holds absolute power. He could exercise that power against the claims of the Temple authorities and Jesus' threat to their privileged and entrenched positions. But he doesn't. He disposes of Jesus.

So the first thing this part of the Passion narrative tells us is: 'Be very sceptical about people who sigh and say 'Really, there's nothing I can do'. There is plenty that Pilate can do – but he realises that Jesus threatens Rome as much as Jerusalem with his teaching about the ultimate sovereignty of God over Caesar. So it suits him to have Jesus taken off the scene. Washing his hands could just be a cynical smokescreen.

Even if we look at events more charitably for Pilate and conclude his hand is forced by the fervour and fanaticism of the crowd, there are still things he could do. Palestine isn't a democracy. He is the governor and no-one in Judea can get rid of him. So the second thing this passage tells us is: those with power hinder rather than help those in need by omitting to use the power they have. Are there Pilates in the world today? There are certainly leaders with autocratic power in North Korea, Zimbabwe, Libya and various other states across the Middle East. What's our relationship with them? How distant or close, how separate or enmeshed is our national government, the government we elect now and in the future – whether by first past the post or AV – with them? It's salutary to reflect on how much our and other western nations' interests in these countries seems to be governed by such things as our dependence on oil on them now and in years to come. What power should we be looking to use, through the ballot box and other means, to ensure justice for all rather than just justice for those who can sell us oil?

And what about the power we can exercise in smaller spheres – families, voluntary organisations, neighbourhoods, businesses, schools, sports clubs and churches? It is doubly wrong to do as Pilate did and set someone up to be criticised and attacked and then arrange things so that one can deny all

responsibility. It's not good to allow others to prevail upon you with persistence or emotional blackmail if you are in a position, if you have some power to make a difference. Examples might be: investors – people who might opt to place funds in companies that have clear social dividends; shareholders with power to oust directors who won't steer their company towards fair and sustainable practices; shoppers and consumers (al of us therefore) with power, on the one hand, to buy fairly traded or ethically sourced goods and to shun the products of companies that abuse their staff or the environment.

Environmental clean up campaigns, like the Bristol Noise which Henleaze and Westbury Community Church has a big hand in running, are good examples of how, where people want to make a difference, things can be done. It turns out that people are not as powerless as everyone initially thinks.

So saying 'There's really nothing I can do' may not be sufficient excuse. Politics begins when one realises there is plenty one can do. Discipleship begins when one realises there is much more that we can do that Jesus himself did – including being faithful rather than 'churchy', including extending the kingdom of God rather than kowtowing to the kingdom of Man.

Questions for reflection and prayer:

What are the things that people valued in Pilate's and Jesus' time?
What are the things that people value today?

Who were the powerful people in Jesus' time?
Who are the powerful people today – globally and locally?

What's it like to wash one's hands when one knows one has done a terrible thing?

What power, what spheres of influence do you have?
How do you recognise God's sovereignty in them?

What's it like to know you have more power than you previously recognised?

Meditation 2 My passion – compromised by power?

The first meditation focused on our personal power to make a difference in the world by recognising the nature of God's sovereignty in the world uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ. WE have more power than we think to attest to God's sovereignty. We focus now on God's power to work with us to extend the kingdom first fully revealed in Christ. God's power, as I hope we shall all see, is a miracle of grace, given how flawed, how attached to and compromised by earthly power his disciples are.

On the whole, the gospels take a dim view of the Jewish ruling classes. The Herodians had thrown in their lot with Rome. The Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes were consumed with the minutiae of the Law and couldn't cope with God's bigger picture. But from their ranks emerge two figures. The first appearing in our reading just now is Joseph of Arimathea.

Each of the gospels tells us something about him. Matthew describes him as a rich man. Mark says he is a member of the Temple Council, the Sanhedrin: Luke emphasises he is a prominent member of the Council. John's indicates, like the others, that he is a disciple of Jesus, 'though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews'. Joseph, then, is a disciple, but one who is still attached to wealth and power.

With him appears Nicodemus. His part in John's gospel is significant. Appearing fearfully by night, he is identified in chapter 3 of John's gospel as a Pharisee. This means he belongs to the group which gave God's prophet, John the Baptist, a hard time – and the group which seems to pick Jesus up on what he is doing wrong more than any other. He is also a member of the Council, the Sanhedrin, and therefore more than somewhat in Rome's pocket. Then, in John chapter 7, Nicodemus appears again, this time trying, weakly, to speak up a bit for Jesus when the chief priests and Pharisees send the temple police after Jesus. At this point he says the right thing: 'Our law doesn't judge people without first giving them a hearing, does it?' – but he doesn't say it with enough force or conviction to prevail. When his attachment to this man from Galilee is questioned he makes no response back. The narrative simply moves on.

Both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus come over, therefore, as interested but flawed disciples. Both of them are part of the ruling system. Both of them are members of the religious council which has thrown in its lot with a despotic secular power. Both of them, as indicated by Joseph's description as 'rich' and by Nicodemus' ability to bring seventy five pounds of herbs and oils – a vast quantity - for Jesus' burial – are people, as we say today, 'of wealth and substance'. They wouldn't have been out of place in a church in Kensington or Mayfair. Perhaps, dare I say, they wouldn't be out of place in a church in North West Bristol.

Both of them, though, give us a good idea about what God can do with unpromising material. Both of them indicate that, sharing flaws with the likes of you and me, God can use and indeed transform the little they offer into something significant and important for the building of the kingdom.

Look at what they do at what could be said to be the darkest hour of the Passion, when Jesus has died. They step into the shoes of the leading disciples. Where are Peter, John, James and Philip at the point where Jesus dies and needs burying? Nowhere to be seen. We don't know where these shy disciples are at the time of Jesus' death –but they do step forward now, better late than never. And what they do at this point can give us all great hope.

Joseph of Arimathea, rich and influential, does what the rich young ruler that Jesus encountered and invited to act some time before failed to do. In asking Pilate for Jesus' body and showing allegiance to this 'troublemaker', Joseph is, in some sense, risking his life – and, in burying Jesus' body, he certainly 'gives to the poor'. In this, at least, Joseph is doing what Jesus has asked and is beginning to be an obedient disciple. Luke also describes him as a person who was 'waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God'. In this he reflects a holy person Luke mentions at the beginning of his narrative – Simeon 'righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel'. A further consolation for us all is that Joseph and Nicodemus are joined beyond the moment of Jesus' death by another character – the Centurion – in all of them being deeply compromised characters who nevertheless proclaim the gospel not only in word but also in deed at a moment when Jesus' regular disciples are invisible. Doesn't that give you both pause for thought about who God counts as disciples and hope in relation to God using our own frail efforts at obedience?

Nicodemus and Joseph are very similar characters. They both highlight the ambivalence which permeates not only the Gospels but the whole New Testament as to whether discipleship of Christ can co-exist with wealth, privilege and power. On the evidence of the accounts of Jesus' burial in

all four gospels, the verdict would tend, I suggest, to be hopeful rather than negative. It's very much a question, perhaps, of 'better late than never: definite room for improvement.'

Let's home in for a moment on Nicodemus. Remember, he is the one who came to Jesus by night - who sought to keep his discipleship, his recognition of Jesus' nature and his desire to follow Jesus' teaching, hidden away. It is a discipleship with which everyone here, I reckon, will be familiar. In today's world, being a Christian gets you no Brownie points. Because of the simplistic, naïve and anti-intellectual approaches taken by some of our brothers and sisters in Christ, Christianity is taken by some - and knocked - for being impervious to scientific and historical research. Additionally Christians are taken to be not just morally conservative but intolerant, uncaring and even abusive of others, in a world which claims increasingly to respect diversity of identity and self-expression. The temptation is to become evermore 'a Christian by night'. Professions increasingly want their members to put their personal preferences and assumptions to one side when carrying out their professional roles. Businesses require every conversation, in the end, to be about the bottom line of profit and loss. The temptation is to become evermore 'a Christian by night'. And what is true of office work environments can be true in other places too. Those involved in education - whether as teachers, students, parents or governors - can face situations where opting for a distinctly Christian stance will cause them difficulty, both practically and emotionally. There may be no escape in the family either. Sometimes it's difficult to be a Christian by night when you are clearly a Christian in the day. The keenest Fair Trade protestor against the world's injustices can be shy of seeming judgmental before their own children. Effective preachers can be accused of being hypocritical by their own family. Sometimes sensitive and compassionate Christians are heartless or even brutal by night.

Thankfully, God's mercy is prodigal and positive change and transformation takes place, over time, even in compromised, flawed disciples like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus - and you and me. Joseph and Nicodemus are significant figures. But they show what happens if one remains overly 'religious' - tied to the rules rather than the spirit, to the church more than the kingdom. On this Good Friday it behoves us to be aware: their style showed reverence for Jesus' dead body. But their approach also helped put Jesus to death.

What is our discipleship doing? Contributing, in our own time, to Jesus dying again - or bringing new life in Jesus to others?

Questions for reflection and prayer:

What's it like to be on a committee or group and realise others in the group are plotting something terrible?

What's it like to feel your personal faith makes no public difference: is it just a matter between you and God?

What's it like to be a Christian in a professional, business or hard nosed 'scientific' context: when and how does faith come into play?

Who might find it easy to be Christians by day - but not 'by night'?

Who are tempted to be Christians by night and not by day?

Meditation 3 My passion transformed by God's power

We all know that one of Peter's most endearing qualities is that he makes mistakes. We like him because he gets things wrong. We feel encouraged and comforted because, if the disciple Jesus chose to be the leader of his followers was so flawed and fallible, there's hope for us all.

One of the ways of looking at the account we've just heard of Peter denying Jesus 3 times is as a parallel trial: Jesus in one court and Peter in a court to the side. But while both are questioned and accused of particular things, aspects of their situations are diametrically opposite. Jesus is surrounded by learned, expert accusers but stands firm: Peter is questioned by inept bystanders – and quails under attack. Jesus stresses that he has spoken the truth and declared his message openly: Peter evades and denies, becoming an enemy of the truth. Jesus is on trial for his life: Peter's life isn't threatened or in question. Peter has heard Jesus say 'I am' many times: here Peter says 'I am not'. Peter has heard Jesus say 'I am the light of the world': here Peter denies knowledge of the light of the world and finds himself shivering by a small courtyard brazier.

Isn't it amazing that God should chose – and be able –to build the Christian community after Jesus' ascension on such a character? However the church is founded, it's clearly not on a person or authority that never gets things wrong.

Re-establishing Peter's fallibility, I invite you to hold the picture of Peter denying Jesus by the courtyard fire three times in your mind and compare it now with the story of Jesus encountering Peter and the disciples after the Resurrection – and Peter being given the opportunity to affirm his allegiance and love for Jesus three times, this time by a breakfast barbecue fire on the shores of Lake Galilee.

As with the parallel trials in John 18 that we have just explored, there are deep ironies too in the affirmation passage that John provides in chapter 21. Not least of these is that, as you may remember, when Jesus asks Peter for the third time whether or not he loves him, John writes: 'Peter felt hurt because he asked him a third time 'Do you love me'. Peter felt hurt! Isn't that a bit rich given that Peter had denied Jesus completely when his life was threatened and in his hour of need. If anyone was entitled to feel hurt, it was surely Jesus at Peter's betrayal – not Peter at being asked a question three times!

But Peter has passion, doesn't he – and that excuses a lot! He's hurt by Jesus' question – because he's so sensitive, because he feels things so intensely and passionately. There is perhaps a downside to his passion, though. And it's to this downside that we should turn now.

The problem is that passion alone is not enough to help Peter - or any would-be disciple - become a fully devoted follower of Jesus. This is because passion often leads to two unhealthy tendencies. At the Last Supper, in Matthew's account, Peter is full of bravado. When Jesus says 'This very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times' Peter responds 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you'. When Jesus says 'you' with reference to the disciples, Peter hears 'they' – other disciples, not him. His passion, at this point, gives him airs above his station: it becomes a trap, leading him to exalt himself above others. Over-confidence and a feeling of being just a bit different and superior: that's passion's tendency number one. And then passion leads Peter to contradict, to second guess Jesus erroneously, not once but twice. When Jesus says 'you will all fall away' Peter says 'The others may, but I shall never' Jesus responds 'Truly you will' and Peter comes straight back with, in effect 'Oh no, Jesus, I know myself better than you do – I shall never fall away'. Is he right or is he wrong? He is wrong both times. Passion alone isn't enough. It leads in this case to tendency number two: a misplaced confidence in your own abilities, a sense that you know better than Jesus.

There is, however, a remedy for the inadequacies that we can see in pure passion. That remedy is to be found in what we see in Jesus, dealing with Peter's passion, by the breakfast barbecue at the lakeside. The remedies Jesus offers - his distinctive forgiveness and friendship – have special and particular powers.

The forgiveness God in Christ brings Peter as he affirms and re-commissions Peter after Peter's denials dissolves Peter's arrogance in assuming he was superior, a cut above and with more outstanding qualities than his fellow disciples. Jesus' commissioning of Peter after Peter's fall is a commissioning not based on Peter's qualities but on God's grace. But, as time goes on, Peter increasingly discovers that the qualities he needs to be the disciple God knows he can be are ones that only God can provide.

In addition the forgiveness Jesus brings by re-commissioning Peter also seems to dissolve Peter's habit of thinking he knows better than Jesus. What we see in Jesus at this point is what could be termed a new and distinct kind of forgiveness. It's not based on the premise that everyone deserves a second chance. It's not based on the premise that bitterness hurts the victim more than the sinner – so it's good to help the victim feel better. It's not based on the premise that time heals most things. The distinctive element of Jesus' forgiveness as offered and experienced by Peter at this point is what someone has called 'the logic of resurrection' ('Power and Passion' Sam Wells p153). 'Resurrection knows the power of death yet loves with the force of life'. Only this logic, the logic of life bursting out from death with the power of God can truly sustain forgiveness.

And what of Christ's friendship? The kind of loving friendship Jesus offers and invites of Peter at the lakeside disciplines Peter's passion in a number of ways. Behind the vocabulary of love that peppers Jesus and Peter's restorative conversation by the lakeside lies a whole hinterland of different meanings. Experts tell us that Peter keeps casting his words in the language of friendly 'brotherly' love, thinking this is what Jesus wants and expects. But Jesus is offering to and seeking of his friend something deeper. Jesus' vocabulary points to utter selfless love, the intimate and self giving love that God has for us. In effect Jesus asks 'Do you love me as a friend, the way you love everyone else? Or do you love me wholly and utterly, the way I love you?' Peter's reply 'As a friend, of course' does not hold the sacrificial depth that Jesus offers and looks for. But it's as good as Peter can do – and the Incarnate God, in his grace, accepts it.

So the good news for us all is this: if Peter can find a place once again in Jesus' heart, we all can. If Jesus has a significant role for Peter to play, passionate and unreliable as Peter is, then he has a role for each one of us. The most powerful force in political and human experience is not, it seems, the might of Rome; it is Jesus' cross and resurrection and the friendship and forgiveness they make possible – as much for us as for Peter.

Questions for reflection and prayer

What's it like to see again someone you have hurt very badly indeed?

What's it like to be given another chance?

What's it like to give someone else another chance?

What's different about Jesus' offer of forgiveness to any offer I would make?

Are the people Jesus is building the church today with as fragile as Peter?

How can passion be used to best effect?

What's distinctive about God's power?