

23 November 2014: The Servant King Ephesians 1:15-23 and Matthew 25:31-46

I was leafing through a magazine this week and came across an article that opened with a phrase I've found is used a lot by Christian commentators and one that irritates me immensely and I thought 'pah'. And then, calming down I re-thought, and instead of dismissing it, I wondered why it is used so much. It's the one that says, how some aspect or other of the Bible is 'especially pertinent for today' and then tries to draw out what we can learn from the recession or a healthcare crisis or some other headline in the news. And although I often think that the writer is manipulating the Bible in some way, it's also true that the reason why it is pertinent today is because so much of it reveals an understanding of the human condition. There is both a timelessness about it and a timeliness in its application. And there is often something in a passage that speaks to us across the centuries and binds us in some way both to the circumstances when it was written and to the people who would have first heard it.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians has done that for me ever since I moved to Bristol. I'm going to describe a street scene and ask you to imagine yourself in it. You are in the middle of a city, there are imposing buildings and many people walking, hurrying as they go about their everyday business, the traffic on the roads is heavy, moving slowly. There's a lot of noise. You are standing at the top of a steep street, at a T junction and the steep street is lined with shops and restaurants. Looking down the street your eyes are drawn to an open area and to a large place of worship, with a library close by. Beyond that is a harbour area which was once bustling with shipping. Where were you? Well, I'm hoping you thought you were in Park Street. But you could have easily been in Ephesus. And that's what helps Ephesians come alive to me, the similarities with the place where I live and work, both in terms of its geographical features and what it represents. Ephesus was a place of power and so too, in its way, is Bristol.

What other similarities might there be? What might be the timelessness and timeliness of this passage and that of the gospel reading?

I'm not sure how many of us think that we wield any real power, or even are influential enough with those who possess power. Paul is writing to those who have little if any power in a political, social or financial sense. Jesus too is speaking to the powerless in a worldly sense. And yet both Paul and Jesus are talking about wielding power and using it well.

Paul reminds his audience that the greatest display of power the world had ever seen took place when God raised Jesus from the dead. The risen Jesus is now enthroned over the entire cosmos. Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus is that they will come to realise that this same power is available to them for their daily use. He prays that they would be given the gift of wisdom and to have the eyes of their inmost self opened to God's light and to know the outstanding greatness of his power. That isn't to make us somehow into conjurors, much of God's power is used in ways that others will not see. I often think that while I know I can't change other people, I can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, change myself. And that is God's power at work in me, though sometimes, most times, I can be very resistant. And God's power is available to each of us, what ever stage of life we are at, whether our world has shrunk to the size of a bed or a small room, or we are out and about locally or on a more national or global stage. Because wherever we are, we take ourselves with us and we meet other people.

I came across a horrible phrase the other day. It was used to describe some of the puritans who were arguing with James I about the future direction that the Church of England should take. They were said to love their God with all their soul and to hate their neighbour with all their heart. If that is true then it is an abuse of the power that God gives. For Jesus shows in our gospel reading that the blessed ones demonstrate faithfulness by performing acts of loving kindness.

Kindness which is an instantaneous response of unselfish love, being willing moment by moment to reach out to others with the strength (power if you like) and love that Jesus gives as they start to obey. Strength and love that is given to us as we start to obey. It's about being prepared to live/love dangerously in the power of the Holy Spirit.

John Ortberg writes of wanting that compassionate heart but finding that his life is made up of so many 'have to do's'. In the sense of this has to be done or that has to be done that he doesn't have space for people. And it's hard to be compassionate with a full 'to do' list. Developing a compassionate heart takes space, takes time and takes effort. Having the time to recognise when someone is hurting, when someone is poor in spirit, or simply poor, and being able to put down what you are doing and respond. He also quotes a saying that if the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy. Relationships, both with God and with people, take time to develop. In the same way that a slow cooked meal will taste better than a microwaved ready meal, so does time spent in worship, in prayer, in reading or listening to the word of God, in listening to others, enjoying each others company. We can trust God with our time. The world won't come to an end if a carpet isn't hoovered or the grass not cut, or a shirt isn't ironed. Those jobs will get done, somehow but building relationships are as, if not more, important. Feed the hungry and thirsty, with both physical and spiritual nourishment. Exercise hospitality to strangers and those who are lonely. Visit the sick and those in prison. And think about that both literally and more broadly. For there are many who are imprisoned in chains they have made for themselves and need time and encouragement to see how they can be made whole and free. If we become too busy to do these things, to eat on the go rather than slow cook friendships then we miss out on a life that God intended for us.

And developing a compassionate heart is an act of power. Humanity is an exercise in life, death and neighbours. We have to remain vigilant of ourselves. We constantly need forgiveness. How often do we find ourselves starting out with a wish to be compassionate and then failing. Someone or something will irritate and we find ourselves snapping or saying the one thing that we know we shouldn't or will spark off an unhelpful reaction in another. But while we need to be alert to that, we can also be aware that God is merciful, he will heal and accept us. And we can only learn that in the hurly burly of life. As much as I might seek to develop a compassionate heart, I also know that others around me here in St Peters are working on their own hearts too. And as we sometimes clash or try find common ground so we together are learning the nature of God's mercy and his power to change us, transform us so that this community may be better able to serve Christ and further his Kingdom.

Amen

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