

SERMON - Power (Palm Sunday)

One has only to take a look at the walls of any teenager's room to see that the age of heroes is not dead. Pictures of football, rugby and cricket stars, movie stars, pop stars and other heroes and icons can be found in places easily to be admired. Some in the older generation may have pictures of the royal family, if not on the walls, certainly in albums. Military heroes have been admired, and in pre-photography days were portrayed in statues, paintings and on coins. How do people behave when their heroes come to town, or are in parades? Some of us may remember images of ticker tape parades on the Pathe News at the cinema. Visits of royalty and heads of state have often attracted large numbers of people waving flags. Football and other sports fans wave scarves made of cloth and wear painted flags on their faces. In Jesus' day heroes and victors could expect to process through the streets of a city on a horse, with cloaks thrown onto the ground in front of them and surrounded by a crowd waving palm branches. Perhaps an unwelcome invader would receive a less welcoming reception.

What do all these people have in common? They are individuals with power - some to sway crowds, some to set trends, some to be icons of behaviour, some to demand high salaries and some to be in positions from which they can control the lives of others. Often, these people use whatever kind of power they possess to benefit themselves, with little consideration for others. That is the way of the world, and always has been. The desire to control others in order to build up one's self-image, determined self-preservation, and the attitude of every man for himself, has made for numerous wars, slavery, abuse of every kind, grief and unhappiness throughout the centuries. These attitudes have revealed the many negative aspects of human nature.

The misuse of power and control is of central concern to God. It is one of the aspects of life in the world which He created, which has gone disastrously wrong. One of the qualities of life in the Kingdom of God which Jesus came to establish, was to be a new attitude to power. The reasons why Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey were not only to claim his kingship of God's chosen people, but to announce that God's coming kingdom was to be based on peace and humility, rather than war, and ruthless exercise of power and control over others. The whole spectrum of human relationships was to be turned on its head, in order that people could live according to God's life principles and not those presently in vogue in one's society. Jesus himself was our example of this radical change in attitude to power. What he revealed was that life in God's Kingdom is based on weakness, vulnerability and service towards others, but that God's power is available for the asking to bring about peace and wholeness.

To do a little backtracking, the subject of Jesus and his relationship to power came up very early in his human life. It was presumed by Herod, for example, that the Jewish king sought by the 3 Wise Men was a contender for his actual, physical throne. Such was the perceived threat, that a terrible massacre ensued. Decades after Jesus' death, in one of the early letters to the young churches, the author of Phil. 2:6-7 could pen after much thought, that Jesus Christ "who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Jesus' life was never intended to be one long opportunity to wield power in the sense that we think of it. In the wilderness, when he was tempted by Satan, the nature of his temptations reveal that he could have fallen into that trap, but he chose not to. What he rejected was using his divine power for his own needs, putting himself in a position of being a popular hero, performing spectacular feats for the praise of the public and having the power of a mighty, earthly ruler. Any of those positions could have built up his ego, but they would not have allowed him to accomplish his God-given purpose. And that was to give his life for others, while he lived a human life and in

the manner of his dying.

There is little in the record of Jesus' early life that reveals how his relationship to power was manifested. We presume that he worked at the family trade, and that living in an occupied country taught him what happened to both people and land when human power was misused. That he learned from these experiences when came the time for him to make a choice, is quite evident. But at the age of thirty, he would also have learned that when you take on the might of a strong and pervasive empire, as well as a long established, corrupt religious hierarchy, you are living very dangerously. Nonetheless, he taught his disciples that one's place of importance in the Kingdom of God was determined by servanthood and not by position or tyrannical control over others. By riding into Jerusalem on a beast of burden, he was acting out a caricature of the Emperor riding into the city on a horse, a beast of war and conquest. And he was claiming to be the Messiah, the anointed descendent of King David who would save the Jews. That was taking on the centres of power with a vengeance.

During his public ministry, Jesus spent approximately 3 years living his life, concerned for the needs of others. He healed the sick, he embraced the unlovely and the marginalized, and he taught, in a lively, unforgettable way, to large numbers of people, what life under God's Kingly Rule was meant to be like. He trained up his disciples to be the first citizens of the new Kingdom of God. In the end, the sources of both secular and religious power were sufficiently outraged and threatened by him and his teachings, that they had him executed. And that might have been the end of the story except for God's power to bring him back to life.

To all intents and purposes, Christianity then is based on servanthood. In any age this would be considered a position of weakness, and vulnerability. It signifies a life spent with the needs of others taking a prominent place. We have heard how Jesus, equal with God, allowed himself to become weak and powerless in order to experience human life, and to restore the relationship between God and humankind. This, of course, was not the first time that individuals had become vulnerable for God's sake. We think of Moses who was called by God to go to the Pharaoh to ask for the release of the Hebrew slaves. Now it would be untrue to say that Moses applied for the position. Like many a divine agent before and since, Moses was chosen by God to carry out this important responsibility. Moses was not personally convinced of his credentials - but God has a very persuasive way. Moses co-operated, knowing full well that his own skills and resources were very limited, but that he had the backing of none other than the creator of the universe. He allowed himself to become vulnerable in order to carry out God's purposes. And other followers of God, such as Isaiah and St. Paul put themselves in similar positions.

Allowing oneself to be put into a position of vulnerability is not a decision made easily. In our power-crazed and money-mad world there are those who may not wish to be associated with weakness and failure. It is not good for one's reputation, or street credibility. By admitting that one has weaknesses, and frailties, one leave's oneself open to attack. When I suggest that we admit to weakness and vulnerability, I am not suggesting that we lay down and die or allow ourselves to be walked over. We do have strengths as individuals and God expects us to use them in accomplishing his purpose in our lives. Loving ourselves, which we must know how to do, in order to be of the most help to our neighbour, consists in accepting both our strengths and weaknesses. But I am suggesting that if we are to follow Jesus, and emulate his life, admitting to a lack of perfection will build many more bridges to people than lording it over them ever will. If we are to spend our lives for others, our own needs and sometimes even our own safety will come second. There are those in the world who have discovered, the hard way, that spending the whole of one's life trying to obtain power, fame and fortune has not brought them that contentment and deep serenity for which they have been searching. And there are those who

have discovered that following Jesus, and embracing servanthood has brought them "that peace which passes all understanding."

Are we Christians to have no association with power at all? Are we doomed to lives characterised by weakness and nothing else? Definitely not! By the presence of God's spirit within us, we have access to that power which was both responsible for the creation of the universe, and the raising of Jesus from the dead. By virtue of our baptism, we become citizens of the Kingdom of God, and members of God's family, with Jesus Christ as our brother and Lord. We have available to us, that power of God which was called upon by Moses, the prophets, Jesus, St. Paul and thousands of others down through the history of the Church. We must, however, be prepared to admit our inability to accomplish some task; confess our powerlessness to face a difficult situation; express our fear of severe illness or pain, before that power is available to us as God has promised. If we have accepted our inadequacy in a situation, we can derive benefit both for ourselves and others. We will know that God keeps his promise to help us, and we can, in turn, pass that assurance on to others.

God's power is available to us in every aspect of life. It can, for example, help bring about our healing and wholeness. It is God's will that we are whole, integrated human beings. Our life experience leaves us with scars and wounds which often cannot be seen with the naked eye. God can use his power, if we ask, to heal those areas of our lives which need to be made whole. It is often the case, that whatever purpose God may have for our lives can only be properly accomplished when such inner healing takes place.

Every Christian is called to make use of their God-given gifts, and for some that may mean the exercise of leadership skills. History shows that there have been occasions when those in positions of leadership in the church have faced the temptation to misuse the authority and power which they have been given. Many have, unfortunately, not been able to resist. Thus the church has failed to show by good example, the revolutionary attitude to power which God requires. And it must be said that it is not only the hierarchical churches which have failed in this way. Even sometimes the gathered and Non-conformist churches have fallen prey to the misuse of power. We must be on our guard at all times to avoid the temptation to use leadership skills inappropriately. As a part of the universal church we in the URC must be just as alert to the dangers as any other. Any power that we are given through the will of God, we must be sure to use for the benefit of all and the advancement of God's Kingdom. I cannot help thinking that the Church might have made more progress in its sharing of the Gospel, if it had taken Jesus' insights into the value of human weakness and the power of God, more seriously. What might have happened if the history of the Church had not been tied up so closely with the centres of power and might!