

## “A topsy-turvey faith”

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2012, at 10 am and 12 noon in St Peter’s Wolvercote and at 5.30 pm in Keble College Chapel.

Mark 10, vv. 35 - 45

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Christian faith and belief is all topsy-turvey. It’s shot through with upside downs, which are admirable, but also hugely difficult and challenging. So we talk as Jesus did, about losing our life to find ourselves – the more we give away in all sorts of different ways, the more we discover the real core of who we are before God. We proclaim belief in the God whom words can’t describe and the universe can’t contain, being held as a baby in a mother’s arms – an image of power made vulnerable, turned on its head. We talk about the first being last and the last being first. And today we hear about God’s Messiah coming among us not in clouds of glory, but as one who serves.

It’s all topsy turvey, all upside down. It goes against the ‘me-first’ preservation instincts engrained in us over the long course of evolution. It runs counter to so much of what we are told by the society around us about success and achievement, about status and ambition. And yet it’s very difficult to stay upside down. Constantly, like half-submerged rubber ducks, we find ourselves bobbing society’s right way up again.

We’re offered a good example of this in today’s Gospel. In many ways James and John show a lot of faith. They believe in Jesus. They know he’s the Messiah. They sense the Kingdom is on the way. There are lots of positives in there. But they can’t resist those base instincts inside themselves for status, power, the top seats. And Jesus has to hammer home the message he’s been trying to drum into them throughout his ministry. True life is all upside down; whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all. I came not to be served, but to serve. And the same applies to you.

But of course where James and John have trod, the Church has often followed. It may admire and sanctify those who have tried to live life upside down, saints like Francis or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But there have also been many times when a desire for power or status has ordered its affairs overmuch. Keeping Christianity the wrong way up is a constant struggle.

I think it’s fair to say that Christianity has had a complex relationship with the exercise of power over the centuries. At times it has modelled itself on an understanding of Christ as the one who shunned power, who voluntarily set aside divine power, who associated not with the powerful but the powerless, and in the end became one with the powerless on the cross.

Christians who follow this line of thinking have taken to heart Lord Acton’s dictum that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. They have decided that the best thing to do is to shun power. Hence they avoid jobs and roles which are traditionally thought of by our society as conferring power on the holder. You may have heard of Henri Nouwen. He was a professor at Harvard who decided to walk away from his academic career in order to live in a L’Arche community alongside people with learning difficulties. He has written a number of extremely thoughtful books, some drawing on his experience at L’Arche. His view typifies what we could call the rejectionist attitude to power. He writes:

“The temptation to consider power as an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest of all. We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power – provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings – is a good thing. With this rationalization, crusades took place, inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent

seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in.” *In the Name of Jesus*, pp.58-59.

All very clear. I have a lot of admiration for Henri Nouwen and his writing. And yet I do want to raise a question about this attitude to power. In particular I want to ask whether the image on which it is based - Jesus as powerless - is really accurate? To my mind, someone who draws large crowds, transforms lives in miraculous ways, and attracts the hostile attention of the authorities, is not powerless. It's just that he is using the power he has in a different way, outside of the traditional corridors of power...which is why those who were walking those corridors felt so threatened by him.

No, Jesus was not powerless. And nor, Christianity proclaims, is God the Father. With this in mind, other Christians have embraced a different attitude to power. This approach starts from the idea that God chooses to draw humanity into partnership with himself in the stewardship of the earth. He equips humanity with the skills and ingenuity to do this. He entrusts them with power to make decisions, effect change, order the world.

And so in Genesis 2, Adam is not put in the Garden of Eden to sun himself in a deckchair, whilst God runs the show. He is put there to till the ground, to look after it and get the best from it. And when God creates the animals, he delegates responsibility for naming them to Adam. The message is clear: human beings are called to play their part in ordering the world around them, and God has given them the powers to do so. This is a vital part of what makes us human.

But more than that, theologians like John MacQuarrie, argue that when human beings fail to exercise that power, they actually fall into sin. He suggests that human beings can fall prey to two opposite kinds of sin. One is the sin of the dictator, the Hitlers and Stalins of this world – the naked lust for power at all costs, including that of the life and well-being of millions of others. But at the opposite end is the sin of shunning power, running away from our responsibilities as human beings – not using the skills and abilities we have to shape society in creative ways, to speak out against injustice, to oppose malevolent ideologies. This is the sin of becoming less than human, becoming like animals, burying our heads in the sand or hiding under the bedclothes.

So what Christians who follow this approach are saying is that it is part of our calling as human being to use our God-given abilities to shape society and steward the earth. For many Christians that will mean not avoiding roles which confer power, but entering into them in response to God's call to order our societies in the best way possible. And if we want examples of this approach, perhaps we could cite Desmond Tutu, using his office to challenge Apartheid and then set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Or those Christians who work within governments or the United Nations to draw peace out of conflict or for better stewardship of natural resources or equal treatment for women or oppressed minorities. Or those who feel their faith draws them into being local councillors or human rights lawyers or whatever.

But if we are to embrace this other approach as Christians, and actually seek out roles where we can help shape society for the better, how do we maintain the topsy-turviness? How do we keep our lives upside down, serving rather than being served, as Jesus did? Abraham Lincoln once said (and I'm sure today he would have said it in non-sexist language): “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power”. The challenge as Christians is not to be consumed by power, but to use it creatively, just as Jesus did.

So how can we do that? Let me suggest four things:

1) First, we need to hold in mind that ultimate power belongs to God: only God can create, and only God can call us back into being after death. Human beings are incapable of either of those

things and ultimately therefore powerless. Any power we do have is entirely dependent upon God's original gift not just of life, but of the freedom to shape our societies for good or ill. Ultimately we are dependent on him. Remembering that should help us keep the power we do exercise in healthy perspective.

2) Second, we need constantly to remember Jesus' teaching that he came not to be served, but to serve. And to emulate that in our lives. A priest I know once organised a conference for his Diocese in New Zealand. On the last evening, he put out a call for help to clean the loos very early the next morning. He arrived at the appointed time, to find the Archbishop of New Zealand already hard at work with a mop. If we catch ourselves worried about status like James and John, standing on our dignity, saying things to promote ourselves – and we all do it at times – perhaps it's time to refocus on Jesus's words about service, or on the foot-washing at the Last Supper.

3) Third, both these things I've mentioned are easier if we hold the power we do have in prayer before God. He will guide us in the right use of it. He will shine a light on any misuse of it. And if we can do the same in prayerful conversation with trusted others, that too will help us stay upside down.

4) Finally, we need to be willing to be led by God into uncomfortable places, into difficult unpromising situations ... in order just to be there with all the skills and abilities we have, and to see what emerges by God's grace. It is very easy in our society to stay comfortable. But the danger of that is that the power we exercise can then become self-serving rather than other-serving. God's call isn't always to lush gardens, to what we feel at home with. Often his call is to the wilderness, to join our power to his power in making that blossom and flourish.

For all the positives in their faith, James and John had somehow lost a healthy perspective on power and status. Jesus' response to them is the reminder we all need from time to time, to keep trying to live life upside down.

Amen.