

Trinity 9

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey, on Sunday 29 July 2018

Readings: Proper 12 (B) – Ephesians 3 verses 14-end and John 6 verses 1-21

There is to be a general election in Zimbabwe on Monday this week. After thirty seven years of increasingly brutal and corrupt government, Robert Mugabe was deposed in a coup d'état in November 2017. Now, of course, it could well be argued that there is no lawful authority for a coup d'état, and that the military were overthrowing a democratically elected leader. But the coup d'état and the decision of the military leaders in Zimbabwe could equally well be argued as being the lesser of two evils: a mechanism to allow the true will of the people to be demonstrated – the peaceful overthrowing of tyranny and dictatorship. Whether democracy will be allowed to triumph tomorrow remains a big question, with the vested interests in Mugabe's ZANU-PF party unlikely to let go of power without a struggle.

So, the people of Zimbabwe need our prayers in the run up to the election, and may need them even more in the aftermath.

Zimbabwe is a long way away, and we have plenty of power struggles closer to home. So why bother about Zimbabwe? Two reasons: it is a country that has seen so much cruel brutality and it is a country (there are, of course, too many others) where the misuse of power has been so devastating for so long.

Power is an ambiguous word. It can signify what is positive and useful, but its misuse has dire consequences. It has been painful to listen to the hearings in the UK this past week about appalling misuse of power by clergy – and our corporate failing to respond to this misuse of power. The English word *dynamic* is derived from *dunamis*, the ancient Greek word for power, which emphasises this ambiguity starkly. To describe somebody as *dynamic* is generally a compliment, whereas words which describe the opposite to *dynamic* include *half-hearted* and *lethargic*. One can imagine many organisations – even church congregations – seeking a *dynamic* person in a job advertisement. But words are important and nuanced. Even though *powerful* and *dynamic* might seem to have similar basic meanings, the values they communicate are different. It is as unlikely that they would advertise for a *powerful* person as they would for a *lethargic* person.

But power can have other shades of meaning.

The feeding of the great crowd, the five thousand people, is a demonstration of the power of grace and generosity. Jesus provides for their needs unconditionally and abundantly – so much so that there is more food than they need. Twelve baskets are left over. And yet this demonstration of God's gracious generosity cannot happen without the gift of bread and fish from a boy in the crowd. It's laughably inadequate, in human terms. But Jesus uses this opening gambit of unconscious and unaffected generosity in a remarkable way, to feed the crowd. We don't need to know *how* it happened, and that's not the point, but they went away satisfied with full bellies – even if they don't (at this stage in Jesus' ministry) see the deeper and fuller significance of what the miracle means and even if they misunderstand what Jesus wants from them by trying to make him an earthly king. They have misunderstood his power and try to manipulate Jesus to play into their mistaken notions of power.

There are many examples in the Bible of selfish and manipulative misuse of power; for example, we saw this in the beheading of John the Baptist at the behest of Herodias in the gospel reading earlier this month. But today's gospel reading shows us power used well. Jesus uses his power to demonstrate God's love and how the exercise of generous and selfless love has consequences that we can barely imagine. One boy making a faltering offering, initially ridiculed by the disciples, allows Jesus to show God's generous love and care. Human effort, as the disciples discover when the storm blows up on the sea, is inadequate in the face of sacrificial and all-sufficient love.

The miracle is that God allows us to learn, in spite of our nature and even our preference, that love and selflessness should characterise how we deal not only with God but with each other. St Paul speaks to the Ephesians, and to us, about the importance of being 'strengthened in our inner being with power through God's Spirit' and prays 'that we may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ.' That is power used well, which leaves no damage and which enriches all who experience it.

To close, the words of St Paul: 'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.'