

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 27th SEPTEMBER
2020

INTRODUCTION

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." That is St Paul's challenge to us today – and what a challenge! To let our thinking be so influenced by Jesus' example that our characters begin to reflect his character, and our lives his life.

And what might that look like in practice? Today we are invited to reflect on one central facet of Jesus' life: his refusal to exploit his power, to lord it over others. His priority was to live a life of obedience to God, even when to do so cost him power and prestige. Which perhaps doesn't sound too difficult, until you try to put it into practice! To do so is likely bring you face to face with some of your deepest insecurities and fears.

Who is up to the task of following God so obediently? None of us! But as St Paul reminds us "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure".

As you come to worship, pause for a moment to thank God that He is already at work in your life; and open your heart to the one who, by His gentle power, can help you both to want to follow in Jesus' footsteps, and actually to do so.

CALL TO WORSHIP

This is the day that the Lord has made.
We will rejoice and be glad in it.

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We will rejoice and be glad in it.

Faithful one, whose word is life:
come with saving power
to free our praise,
inspire our prayer
and shape our lives
for the kingdom of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

GOD LONGS FOR US TO KNOW AND LOVE AND TRUST
HIM.

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord that healeth thee.
I am the Lord that healeth thee.
I am the Lord that healeth thee.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

The Spirit of the Lord fills the world
And knows our every word and deed.
Let us then open ourselves to the Lord
and confess our sins in penitence and faith.

You made us to be one family,
yet everywhere humanity is divided.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

You came to reconcile all people,
yet everywhere the races live in disharmony.
Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You rejoice in our differences,
yet we make them a cause of enmity.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

**May the God of love and power
forgive us and free us from our sins,
heal and strengthen us by his Spirit
and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Silence

Blessed is the Lord

For he has heard the voice of our prayer;

Therefore shall our hearts dance for joy

And in our song will we praise our god.

A COMMITMENT TO TRUST IN GOD (New Living Translation)

O LORD, I give my life to you.
I trust in you, my God!

**Do not let me be disgraced,
or let my enemies rejoice in my defeat.**

No one who trusts in you will ever be disgraced,
but disgrace comes to those who try to deceive others.

**Show me the right path, O LORD;
point out the road for me to follow.**

Lead me by your truth and teach me,
for you are the God who saves me.
All day long I put my hope in you.

**Remember, O LORD, your compassion and unfailing love,
which you have shown from long ages past.**

Do not remember the rebellious sins of my youth.
Remember me in the light of your unfailing love,
for you are merciful, O LORD.

**The LORD is good and does what is right;
he shows the proper path to those who go astray.**

(Psalm 25:1-8)

NEW TESTAMENT READING - Philippians 2:1-13 (NRSV)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under

the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING - Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV)

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father^[a] went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Andy Todd)

Power. The philosopher Plato said: “The measure of a person is what they do with power.” Echoing him, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln said: “Nearly all men can stand adversity. But if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

When you think of power, what comes to mind? Maybe politicians vying for big ministerial jobs; or a dictator cracking down on a reluctant nation; or corporate executives trying to expand their empires; or the jostling for supremacy between competing nations like China and America.

If so, you are probably thinking, “Power? That’s not something I have or need to worry about.”

But the fact is, issues of power are very real and important in your and my everyday lives.

Perhaps you are someone whose career is very important to them. If so, you will know the sense of power which comes with a promotion, and how alluring that can be. Or maybe you are the president or chair of a society. How does the sense of power which comes with that feel?

If you are still thinking, “No, that’s not me”, cast your mind back to the last time something happened which shook your world – a bereavement, a surprise medical diagnosis, the loss of financial security. Try to remember (although it probably won’t be difficult) the awful feeling of powerlessness. Quite understandably, we do all we can to protect ourselves from that feeling of powerlessness. In other words, we grasp for power.

We long deeply for the sense of security that comes from having a bit of money in the bank; the feeling of control that comes from having a good health plan in place; the feeling that we can shield ourselves from life’s hard knocks. In those and a thousand other ways we all feel the need to have power over the things and people which touch our lives.

It's completely understandable, and completely human.

Or is it?

One of the really remarkable things about Jesus was that he seemed to be completely uninterested in power. He was never impressed by someone's wealth, title or CV. Rather than amass an army of supporters he sent many of them away. Rather building up a decent bank balance to see him through life's ups and downs, he was supported by friends and strangers. Rather than seizing opportunities to convince others of his credentials, he tended to change the subject.

As we have just seen him do when confronted by the leaders of his day. Jesus has just stormed into the Temple and sent the traders packing. A bit like someone walking into the House of Commons and ejecting all the MPs! Outraged by his behaviour, a Select Committee challenges him to explain himself: who does he think he is? But rather than take the opportunity in front of the cameras to justify his authority, he shines the spotlight back on his interrogators, and accuses them of profound disobedience to the God whose spokesmen they claimed to be.

Jesus has no interest in playing their power games. For him, only one thing matters: obedience to God.

Jesus did not court power through his ministry, and his defining moment was an act of supreme powerlessness: submitting to an unjust death.

For St Paul, Jesus' refusal to grasp at power revealed something fundamental about God's character. Writing to the Church in Philippi he says of Jesus: "...though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself." Actually, this should probably be translated, "because he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." In other words, it is in God's nature not to grasp at power, but to empty Himself.

And, Paul says, those of us who are trying to live as Christians should model our lives on the same attitude. Be sensitive to where we are trying to grasp at power, in big ways and small; and learn to let go.

The story is told of Pope John XXIII that he had a cardinal who was behaving as if the survival of the Church depended on him alone. The Pope took him to one side and said, "I, too, am sometimes tempted to act as if the fate of the world depended on me. But God sends me an angel who stands by my bed and says, 'Hey there, Johnny boy, don't take yourself so seriously!'"

Of course there are times when we as Christians should take a stand against the abuse of power, when we witness the kind of behaviours which Ann Lewin writes about in her poem Power Games:

*"When we play God
We throw our weight around,
Treat people like chess pieces,
Play our game regardless of their
Gifts. Their value lies in
Cost-effectiveness, not in
Intrinsic worth.
And if we lose,
We simply change the rules
And use them to our own advantage."*

Jesus was never slow to call out such abuses of power; and Christian people have rightly been at the forefront of helping marginalised and disempowered groups to gain the power they deserve.

But when it came to trying to enhance his own prestige or power or influence, Jesus simply wasn't interested. His sights were set firmly on being obedient to God. Jesus' strength came from the fact he did not try to cling to power but trusted God to be God.

I wonder whether there is a lesson here for the Church in England at this point in its history?

There is much wringing of hands at the moment about a loss of prestige and influence, both because of increased secularisation and because of dwindling numbers. That is only going to get worse, possibly much worse, post-Covid. What would Jesus say to a Church in that predicament? Possibly something like, "Don't think of power and influence as something to be grasped. Allow yourselves to let go, and just focus on trying to hear what God is saying and on being obedient to Him."

And what of us in our Church? We are not immune to that same loss of power and prestige. Many of us are feeling our age, feeling that we have less power than we used to. What would Jesus say to us? Possibly something like, "Dare to see in your loss of power a gift. Don't try to grasp at your past glories, but let God be God, and just focus on being obedient to Him."

"The measure of a person is what they do with power."
Perhaps one lesson of the current challenging times to us is to face up to our loss of power, and embrace it as an opportunity to be more like the Lord in whose footsteps we follow.

If we can do that, we may discover a new kind of power – the power of God, which is made perfect in weakness.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

In response to what we have heard, let us affirm our trust and faith in God:

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

PRAYERS

God has called us.
As we gather in his name
Let us bring our prayers
Which come from our love and concern.

Lord we thank you for all the help
and encouragement
we are given from the Church –
from its worship, teaching and fellowship;
from its faithfulness in prayer.
Bless and further all loving ministry
in word and sacrament
throughout your Church in the world;
and inspire us both to want your will and to do it.
Silence

O God, be at work in us:
inspiring both will and deed.

Lord, we pray for the world,
where the misery and tragedy of wrong choices
grieves your heart of love.
Let there be wisdom and compassion
in all negotiations and decisions;
let there be humility in leadership
and responsibility for right action shared by all.
Silence

O God, be at work in us:
inspiring both will and deed.

Lord we bring to you the joys and worries,

the frustrations and accomplishments of this week
in the lives we have met and shared.
As we pray, let your light shine into all these lives
for fresh directing and lasting good.
Silence

O God, be at work in us:
inspiring both will and deed.

Lord, we bring to you those we know
Who are suffering in any way.
Give them healing, restore them in body, mind and spirit
and provide them with your indwelling.
From our own community we pray for Ian King, Margaret
Hadley and Cameron.
And in a moment now, we offer you those people on our own
hearts.
Silence

O God, be at work in us:
inspiring both will and deed.

Lord, we remember in your presence
those who have recently died,
particularly those we have known and loved:
Chippy Swindon, Jackie Walmsley, Dave Butcher, Derek
Honeybourne.

And those whose anniversary of death is at this time: Wyn Van
Mechelen, Keith Burton, Muriel Gething, Ron Handy, Geoff
Stroud, James Shutt.

We thank you for them
And for your promise of eternal life and peace.
May we comfort one another through your love.

Silence

O God, be at work in us:
inspiring both will and deed.

We pray the Lord's prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into**

**For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

HAVING THE MIND OF CHRIST

May the mind of Christ, my Saviour,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.

May the Word of God dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph
Only through His power.

May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill me,
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing,
This is victory.

ENDING

From where we are
to where you want us to be
Christ be beside us.

From what we are
to what you can make of us
Christ be before us.

From mouthing generalities
to being true signs of your kingdom,
Christ be beneath us.

Through the streets of this world
to the gates of heaven,
Christ be above us.

**Surround us with your presence,
inspire us with your purpose,
confirm us in your love.
Amen.**