

## **22 July 2018 St Edmundsbury Cathedral:: Patronal Festival**

*“This extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”*

Three weeks ago and thousands of miles away in Malawi, I visited a mother and baby clinic on the outskirts of the city of Blantyre. If the word clinic evokes images of antiseptic, bandages, sterile rooms and white coated clinicians, this was dramatically different. 200 women and their children were crowded into an open yard where babies were being weighed on scales slung from a tree. In one corner sat a nurse vaccinating children against cholera, measles, and mumps; in another mums were being tested for HIV and in a shack at the back of this space was a group receiving medication dispensed from a table top.

It was hot and dusty; many had walked 7 or 8 kilometres to queue for hours in the sun.

Yet in that yard lives were being saved . The atmosphere was of quiet patience, trust and hope : in short profoundly inspiring.

I was there in my role with the humanitarian organisation, St John International. As I pushed gently through the throng, wearing my dog collar, a woman took my hand and whispered “Jesus”. It turned out to be not mistaken identity but the only word we had in common. I blessed her and prayed for her.

I am left feeling that she felt as I did the spirit of Jesus present in that crowd of poor, vulnerable women, who have almost none of the things which carry significance for us – neither possessions, status or power of any kind. By any human standards these were some of the most powerless people in the world.

Yet this is exactly where we should expect to find the deepest and richest experiences of the presence and power of God.

Encounters with the world’s vulnerable people reframe our images of an all powerful and almighty God and help us to discover the God of the Holy Trinity in which all power is shared power and control is relinquished.

Our Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus went to some trouble to make this clear to St James: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so amongst you...”*

When Jesus speaks of the rulers of the Gentiles it was because he was all too familiar with the behaviour of tyrants and the tendency of power to become corrupted. Both the histories and the prophecies of the OT were full of the brutalities and corruption of the Pharaohs or the empires of Assyria and Babylon. It is no surprise that the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation portray the empires of this world as ravening beasts. It is no surprise either that Jesus says *“It shall not be so among you...”*

So the pioneers of our faith were those who confronted these destructive systems of abusive power and gave their lives for it trusting in the apparent powerlessness of God. Last week the Dean reminded us of the price paid by John the Baptist for speaking truth to power, and James the Apostle likewise lost his life to Herod as the book of Acts makes clear.

These tendencies towards unaccountable power are becoming increasingly familiar in our day. We know that we too are living increasingly in the age of the so - called strong men, amongst those who trade in the politics of fear and who when caught in a lie simply deny the facts. We are seeing ever more clearly that this power is often preserved by an emphasis on nationalism and xenophobia as the main motivating principle. When personal ambition and conflicting and uncompromising ideologies appear to have produced gridlock in our system of government.

What are we as a Christian community to do in a world like this? Perhaps we could be forgiven for thinking that this is the wrong question to have to face on Sunday morning in a cathedral. This is our Patronal Festival, our new Dean has arrived, the schools have broken up and the choir is on holiday. Surely here we deserve a break from the complexities of politics and power?

But the Bible simply won't let us get away with that. Almost every page reveals to us a God who is passionately concerned

with the effects of the abuse of power on the people He loves.

Why else rescue the people from slavery in Egypt, console them in exile and continually seek to address them through their prophets and Kings? Why else does Jesus proclaim that he has come to announce good news for the poor, recovery of sight for the blind and release for captives?

St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians read for our second lesson is trying to help the young church in that city come to terms with a new understanding of the power of God. It will involve them in taking a path of a kind of daily dying, trusting radically in the compassion of God and letting go of the self and the ego as the basis of security and the focus of concern. He writes: *"We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."*

St Paul recognises that the power he attributes to God looks for all the world like an idyllic, unrealistic and irrelevant vision of politics. The extraordinary power he speaks of looks just like powerlessness: it looks like madness: the formula for losers.

This is why the treasure he mentions is contained in clay jars – worthless objects which can be thrown away as of no account according to the values of the world. Yet to the person of faith, whose inward journey is opening his or her life to the immense love of God, this is the greatest power and the most real vision for the world there can be.

This “extraordinary power” flies in the face of the conventional wisdom reinforced in all of us every day – namely that the highest goods to aspire to are affluence, appearance and achievement. Every day such options are put to us, offered by differing ideologies or party platforms or political candidates. Indeed the church can fall prey to these ambitions too. But for the person of faith the deepest wisdom finds its roots in God’s intended and preferred future for the world. It comes not as a blue print for action but as an experienced encounter with God’s love.

Last month a group of Christian leaders from different denominations led a pilgrimage of 1000 Christians to the White

House in Washington. They presented a paper which included these words:” *We are living through perilous and polarising times, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership...we believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of our faith are now at stake. As Christians it is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else – nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography – our identity in Christ precedes every other identity...*”

We may feel these words speak for us too in this country. To claim our identity in Christ is to stand trusting in the foolishness of an apparently powerless God and to be ready to face the consequences as St James the Apostle did.

Those mothers and babies in the African clinic have much to teach us about such trust. Having almost nothing that we see as necessary for our security, they have learned to live trusting lives. So when we will be invited in a few moments to declare our faith together, it is trust as well as belief that we are challenged to affirm. And when, at the Preparation of the Table we pray that Our Lord will be present to us in this Eucharist, we

do so in the knowledge that he makes himself known to us (as to the women in that clinic) not in our strength but in our weakness, not in our self-assurance but in our vulnerability, not in our successes but in our failures. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the presence of Christ with the poor and powerless are one and the same thing.

One hundred years ago, a First World War Chaplain became a household name for his courage in the trenches and for his startling poetry about his wartime experiences. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy (known as Woodbine Willie for distributing cigarettes to soldiers under fire) poured out in his poems his indignation with the powers of his day who sent so many young men to their deaths. And he tore into the idea that this was the will of an all-powerful God. He ends his poem “ *High and lifted up*” like this – with words which speak into the heart of our Patronal Festival:

*“Thou hast bid us seek thy glory, in a criminal crucified.*

*And we find it - for thy glory is the glory of Love’s loss,*

*And thou hast no other splendour but the splendour of the Cross.*



*High and lifted up, I see Him on the eternal Calvary,*

*And two pierced hands are stretching east and west o'er land and  
sea.*

*On my knees I fall and worship that great Cross that shines above,*

*For the very God of Heaven is not Power, but power of Love.”*

**+Tim Stevens**

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