

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 24, 2019
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“Heavy lies the head that wears a crown”

St Luke 23:39 “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*”

But if he saved himself, he wouldn't be the Messiah, would he? The irony is this: at the heart of the gospel of *peace* there's an innocent man tortured to *death*. The soldiers plaited his crown of thorns, not to honour, but to *mock* him. They turned rough lumber into a cross, not to pay tribute but to kill him. They enthroned him by nailing him there. Why? Jesus had no army. He brandished no sword. He wielded deeds of love and words of truth. Why hound him to death, then? What kind of kind of king is this? An ironic one, surely. Some hidden power, threatening in some other way, must have been at work in him.

Brute force can silence a voice or drown it out with lies. But it can't make truth *un-true*; it can't kill truth *itself*, can it? There's a harrowing scene towards the end of Orwell's *1984*. Winston, the protagonist, has already been arrested and beaten with a club. But that's not enough. Big Brother's is a *totalitarian* state; it wants to dominate Winston's heart, mind, and soul. At one point, his torturer holds up four fingers. He insists that Winston say he's holding up five. But he can't. He won't. And how absurd, in any case! Brute force cannot 'untrue' the truth. Nor does truth need force to defend itself. Truth doesn't need an empire. Its only defence is itself. Isn't this why truth is always sovereign, and love is always royal? And isn't this why Christ is truly King? Is he not God's truth and love living in our midst?

It wasn't hard to get the Romans to crucify someone. They were a world-wide power running a world-wide corporation: 'Roman Empire, Inc.' Their law spanned a continent, their power backed a rich economy, their armies fought and won. More recent empires follow their game plan. The uniforms change over time but the fist within the glove stays the same. For this kind of power never goes away. It's the power to amass more power. In that respect, it's self-serving. Because much wants more, and enough is

never enough. But to be caught in up in that sort of 'game of thrones', to pay fealty *only* to imperial ambition, blinds us to the truth of *God's* rule in Jesus Christ.

Some leaders, caught up in the empire's way of seeing the world, scoff at Jesus from a distance. "He saved others," they said. "If he's God's Messiah, let him save himself." Close by, at the foot of the cross, soldiers gamble and mock and swear at him. "If you're the king of the Jews, save yourself!" Closer still is a thief, dying on a cross beside him. "Are you the Messiah, or not? Save yourself – and while you're at it save *me!*" He doesn't mean, "Lead me in the way of your kingdom." He means, "Get me down from here! Now!" But the other thief who died beside Jesus that day somehow sees that he really is in the presence of a king. For faith is a power of 'seeing', It's not the power to amass more power. Christian faith is not a prop to help us get ahead in the empire. Faith is the power to see *God's* hidden power at work, even in Jesus' humiliation, suffering, and death – and so, perhaps, in our own too.

Which brings us to a further irony: how often this power is mistaken for weakness. And that's what blinds those onlookers. "If you can't even save yourself from, if you're really that powerless, how did you ever think you could raise an army and push the Romans back into sea?" they ask.

Long before Jesus, Jeremiah cried, "When will we get a righteous king?" – rather as New St James laments today, "When will we be rid of this interim moderator and get the good minister we deserve?" The kings Jeremiah knew were corrupt and incompetent. He complained, as we do, that those who lead us too often *mislead* us. But he trusted God one day to raise up a 'second David' – "a righteous branch" stemming from him; someone who'll "deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land," as Jeremiah says. And what St Luke wants us to see is that, when Israel's righteous king finally came, his power came not from empire's throne, nor from the people's vote, but from the cross.

All his life, Jesus was inviting people into another way of seeing. He called people to follow him. He didn't mean just 'trail behind him' like tourists following a tour guide. To follow him, he said, was to participate in his passion: "deny self, take up your cross,

and follow”, he said. In his words of truth and deeds of love, his skirmishes with antagonists and healing encounters with hurting people, he was saying something like this: “God’s will for the world is not the way of empire. There is another path.” He saw the few dominating the many, the rich exploiting the poor. He saw lepers and lawbreakers shoved to the margins. He saw the apparatus of religion colluding with Roman oppression. And in the face of what he saw, he lived and spoke good news to the poor, bread for the hungry, comfort for the afflicted, forgiveness for sins, healing for hurt, and a place at the table for everyone evicted by empire.

In all of this Jesus was anything but weak. In the way of truth and love, he was forceful: there was power in what he said and did, power enough to incite a vicious backlash from the powers-that-be. For Jesus was not teaching a new style of meditation, or personal growth, or inner enlightenment. He was out to heal the world, to ‘save’ it. He wanted people to see, in him, a new world breaking into the old. And if they could – if they could glimpse it and trust him just enough – he dared them to live in accordance with what he’d shown them, to *follow* him, in other words, to become a new way of living in a new kind of society. That’s supposed to be what we mean by the word ‘Church’; not a ‘religious rec centre’, but ‘the body of Christ’; that is, the embodiment of God’s truth and love.

So, when the leaders, soldiers, and one of the thieves dying beside Jesus, said, “Aren’t you supposed to be a Messiah? Use your power to save yourself!”, they couldn’t see what the repentant thief saw. They couldn’t see that if he saved *himself*, he wouldn’t be the Messiah. Saviours don’t want saving. He enjoys already the fullness of God’s truth and love in an unbroken and undamaged relationship with God the Father. That’s what led him to the cross. That’s why he spent his life this way, for others. And it’s why he lets himself be broken on the cross. For this is how God rules. Not with brute force, to dominate, but with fearless truth and defenceless love. Love and truth are their own defence.

If, like that repentant thief, we’ve gained a glimpse of God’s power in the weakness and suffering of Jesus, can also see it *our* mundane affliction, and in the suffering of every

other creature? Can we see God at work there? The kingdoms of this world persist by assuming and behaving as though the blessed life comes only from mastery, from dominance, from 'lording it' over nature and others, to assert their will by force if necessary. But the gospel tells an ironic tale, about a king who hangs from the cross. Why? For speaking words of truth and doing deeds of love. No brute force. God doesn't play the game of thrones. God simply shows who he is through the person of his Son – divine truth, and divine love. And he puts his question to us. "Am I not your king? Am I not worth your loyalty?"

Here are some words about Jesus' sovereign power made famous by Albert Schweitzer in a book he wrote long ago. See if they ring true to you. "He comes to us...as of old by the lakeside he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same words, 'Follow me!'...And to those who obey him...he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn, in their own experience, *who he is.*"¹

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¹ The closing words of his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.