

Passion Sunday

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Matt 27¹¹⁻²⁶/Phil 2¹⁻¹¹

Today is the beginning of Passion week. It is the week of Christ's passion which means His suffering. It is a week which begins in great triumph as he enters Jerusalem to shouts of joy and welcome by the people and ends in complete and utter defeat as He lays down all worldly power and dies upon a Cross. It is a confusing week – a week hard to contemplate – a week which left His own disciples scattered and lost. Jesus had given in to His enemies. He hadn't lifted a hand to defend Himself. He'd given away all worldly power...

Perhaps one of the most difficult teachings of the Christian faith is the notion that it does not proceed on the back of worldly power. The Kingdom of God does not make progress by virtue of the normal channels of power which operate in the world.

In both of our readings today we find Jesus personifying this principle. **The power of the Kingdom is not the power of the world.**

**⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.**

Jesus deliberately empties himself of any advantage he has by virtue of his divinity, takes the form of a servant and humbles himself even to the point of dying the ignominious death of a simple criminal. In doing so he rejects the various channels of power open to this world. His is not a military revolution – He raises no army. He never becomes a political power even though he is seen as

such by the religious authorities of the day. He is not rich materially so that avenue of influence is not open to him and he even avoids becoming a charismatic figure by moving throughout his ministry in places where he is not known well. Finally he does not avoid his own death.

Despite warnings He goes to Jerusalem during the Passover. He walks into the trap set for him in the Garden of Gethsemane and he refuses to defend himself before the Jewish authorities or before Rome. This is a point made over and over again by the Gospel writers. It was clearly something that made a tremendous impression on them.

Imagine being amongst his disciples witnessing this marvellous welcome into the great city. How proud they would be; how hopeful they would be; how ambitious they would be for the whole movement he'd begun. 5 short days later they are witnessing his cruel death, approved by some of the same people who'd welcomed him in. Can you imagine the disappointment and confusion? Can you imagine how shattered this little group must have been?

They're shattered by the apparent change of heart of the city about him. They're shattered by the injustice of the trials and the verdict. They' shattered also by his apparent unwillingness to point out the inconsistencies in the whole affair. Jesus will not defend himself even though a fledgling lawyer with no experience at all could've poked holes in the prosecution's case. What's going on here?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that the disciple's first reaction to the arrest of Jesus is to 'power up' – to go for whatever power they have and to make a stand for Him. Peter draws his sword and attacks the person closest to him who happens to be the High Priest's servant. Jesus' reaction is one of immediate resistance to this approach...

⁵²Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matt 26)

Notice that he does not deny that he has power. Rather he has decided that he will simply not use it. The same theme occurs when he is brought before Pilate the Roman Governor who clearly recognises his innocence but will not risk his position defending a person who won't defend themselves. He is completely bemused by Jesus' attitude. Why won't he use his power? Why won't he defend himself?

⁸Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" ¹¹Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." (John 19)

The power contrast is again highlighted by the attempt by Pilate to divert the charge against Jesus by proposing to release him under an agreement that he had apparently made with the Jewish population that at Passover he would release one prisoner to them of their choosing. When he proposes to release Jesus they choose instead, Barabbas, a notorious murderer and rebel. Barabbas represents, in many ways, the power of the world. He is a violent man, a man taken up by the idea that one should fight fire with fire and who has committed murder during a revolt against the Romans; something, perhaps, of a folk-hero amongst the Jerusalem population because of his stand against the Romans. Contrast this with Jesus – a peaceful man who has attempted to work from the bottom up, who has not openly challenged anyone's position be it the Jewish Council or the Roman authorities – a man who refuses to use such power to achieve his goals.

What are we to make of this stand? How should it inform the Church and, indeed, we who are Christians today? Does this mean that all worldly power is wrong and to be shunned completely as something ultimately sinful?

Let's begin with that first question – is worldly power essentially wrong and sinful? Let me first define worldly power as that power which extends from the

natural functioning of the world and of human society. This is a wide definition but I think it needs to be because the term can refer to things as diverse as military might, political influence and medical intervention. All these rely, fundamentally, on what might be termed, the natural functioning of the world **and, let me be very clear, Jesus does not condemn any of them.** In and of itself worldly power comes with being in the world. This is not to say they can't be abused but in and of themselves they are not evil. **What he does do is highlight their limitations and, at times, the illegitimate use of such power.** He also points out the natural end of their use which is, at times, quite destructive.

To Peter, for example, when he chops off the ear of the High Priest's servant he says this...

⁵²Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. (Matt 26)

My take on this is that Jesus is pointing out here the natural outcome of the use of military power which is that they will have to face the very same fate they threaten others with. In other words, military/violent power begets military/violent consequences. Jesus refuses to use this power and yet he does advise his disciples at one point to keep a sword handy. Why is this? Jesus is not condoning violence as such here but He is asking His disciples to be realistic. In an age which will soon approve the killing of Christ followers anything that makes attackers think twice may well be useful.

Military power begets military consequences. Violence begets violence. Those who take the sword will have also to face it. Death and suffering and disfigurement are the result of the significant use of military power. Before it is ever used those who use it must ask themselves if the goal of the use of military power is worth this outcome. I realise that this is a huge debate in the church and that many take a more solid pacifist line on this and I want to say that these short comments do not do justice to that debate but the point I am trying to make here is that worldly power **as such** is not condemned by Jesus. Rather we must take care to realise what it can and what it can't achieve and what the consequences of its use are.

One thing that worldly power cannot achieve is the coming of the Kingdom of God. [9]That much seems very clear and Jesus has hinted strongly at this throughout his ministry. 'Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's' There are things which Caesar may demand from us and things which only God may call forth. God's Kingdom is not Caesar's. God's Kingdom is not established in the same way Caesar's was or is. He is even more pointed with the Pharisees.

²⁰Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, ²¹nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17)

The Kingdom does not come with our careful rule keeping and neither will it come with something we can see. In other words, our strength, our rules, our eyes will be of little help in recognising the Kingdom. **It does not come with our power.**

Now what does this mean? Does it mean that we may automatically condemn the application of worldly power wherever we see it? No. It does not mean that. In general worldly power as an extension of our minds and our flesh is not condemned by Jesus or by God. It is, however, treated with great care for two reasons. 1. Power corrupts. All power has a corrupting effect on us and Christians are not immune. From Miners to Ministers the illusion of grandeur comes with power and we must be mindful of its corrupting effect. 2. Such power can only achieve certain things and it requires great care to wield great power. Worldly power can only achieve worldly ends. We humans have been given great power. Our mind has given us power over our world to a greater or lesser degree and we have the potential to do great harm, both to the world and to those who live in it. Again, this power is not wrong in and of itself but it is dangerous and, we should add, limited, for such power, even given the amazing things it can achieve, **can never free the human heart from the bondage to sin and our consequent separation from God.**

And this is so often where we get confused in regard to worldly power. You see worldly power includes whatever we can achieve by our own determination and effort. Again this is not to say that determination and effort are bad things but in regard to the Kingdom they are also not the essential thing.

Teaching our children to be good, to be well mannered, to be honest, to come to church regularly – all this is of some good. But our children must learn something else – all this **effort** will not serve to bring us closer to God for God requires an open heart. Only with such a heart can God truly work into us the Kingdom which brings God's peace and God's joy and God's will. What does the Word say?

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Jesus surrendered to God's will in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a heart wrenching surrender because it entailed a ghastly death and a separation from the Father. It was a surrender that completely confused the disciples who knew what power he could wield if he choose to. It was a surrender that delighted the Jewish religious leaders but confused the Roman overlords.