

Pentecost II June 2021

1 Samuel 8: 4-11, 16-20 Psalm 138 2 Cor 4: 13-5:1 Mark 3: 20-35

Theme of OT reading seems to me to resonate with elements of current affairs.

Israel was traditionally a theocracy, they had been chosen to be unlike the nations, a people directly governed by God, but they want to be governed by a king.

A king seemed to be in God's plan for Israel eventually (Deut: 17: 14-20) so it seems that in and of itself, the desire for a king was not wrong, but Israel's reasoning was. Up till now there have been judges, a leader raised up by God, usually to meet a specific need in a time of crisis. When the crisis was over, the judge usually went back to doing what she or he was doing before. A king, however, not only held office as long as he lived; he also passed his throne to his descendants, and he established a bureaucracy to help him exercise power.

What does God warn through Samuel will happen if Israel insists on having a king?

"He will take... he will take... he will take... and you will be his slaves." (v. 10, 11). Many leaders are takers, not givers, they come to be served, not to serve. God gives fair warning. If Israel wants a king, they must realise he will be a taker, not a giver.

Despite the warnings about the potential consequences, which do eventuate, Israel insists. Such is their apparent desire to be "like other nations" that they are either blind to or refuse to consider the potential for disaster.

"... we are determined to have a king over us so that we may be like other nations..."

They seem to be willing to give up their freedom under the rule of God to a human ruler. Willing to put power into the hands of one man. "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" – Baron Acton.

As I said at the start, the theme of OT reading seems to me to resonate with elements of current affairs.

Violence and discrimination against girls and women; Makarrata and an Aboriginal Voice to the Parliament; climate change, coal and water; migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; aged care. At the root of many of issues currently on the national agenda is the matter of power, who has it, how they use it, or who is challenging them for a slice or perhaps all of it.

Power is also one of the themes in the Gospel reading today.

In Mark's gospel, this is only the 3rd chapter, and already Jesus is stirring things up. He has called his twelve disciples, done some preaching, healed sick people and cast out demons, and already the leaders are annoyed for he is not acting under their authority or doing things their way. He poses a challenge to their power.

So they play the "evil card", which can be devastating in the game of power.

The religion experts who come down from Jerusalem to check out this troublemaker dismiss Jesus and label his work as "demonic". They offer the reasoning that he can cast out demons because he is under the influence of an even more powerful demon, Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

When they label him as demonic, Jesus responds with a riddle: "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come."

The authorities recognise that Jesus must be drawing on great power to perform exorcisms but fatally misidentify its source because he does not behave as they expect a righteous person to behave, i.e. most of all, that he is not one of them. He associates with the wrong people, breaks Sabbath laws, and blasphemes by forgiving sins.

Then his family shows up, in a desperate attempt to save face and stop him from dragging them all down with him into shame and disrepute. They also play the power game, responding to allegations that he “has gone out of his mind”, they play this “crazy card”. They stand outside and send for him thinking that they have the power to restrain him because in the tight-knit village life of first century Palestine, cultural and family obligations held immense power over an individual. The verb used is the same one used to describe Jesus’ arrest, so it is an attempt to exercise considerable power, perhaps even violence if necessary.

In response, Jesus seems to publicly snub his mother and siblings and apparently gives them lesser priority in terms of allegiance than he does to those who follow God.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines power as “possession of control, authority, or influence over others”. Apart from the power to cause physical harm to an individual or group, power is not something we can “own”; it ascribed to us, other people give it to us, or we give it to them.

That is why Jesus is such a problem to the religious authorities and to his family: He challenges and repudiates the traditional power structures and processes of his day. He demonstrates a different type and exercise of power. The power of **love**, a way of living that does not define itself by those it accepts or rejects, “Insiders” and “Outsiders”, which is what his family and the scribes are doing. Instead it seeks always to hold open the doorway of love and forgiveness and inclusion to everyone. Jesus’ alternative way sees everyone, all of humanity, as just one group.

All of us exercise power in different relationships and contexts, as individuals and as collectives: In our families, workplaces, local communities, as consumers and bystanders.

I attended a workshop recently on DV, experienced a real “gut punch” when a speaker put up this slide:



Which refers to this incident, with which you are all familiar, I am sure:



Then the speaker asked this question: “Whose neck have you kneeled on?”

What kind of power do you have and how do you exercise it? Is it the power of love or perhaps some other kind?

Have you, or perhaps are you kneeling on someone’s neck?

Resources

workingpreacher.org: Meda Stamper

blueletterbible.com: David Guzik

Seasons of the Spirit online

Eating with the Bridegroom, John Shea, 2005, Liturgical Press

Laughingbird.net: Nathan Nettleton