

LOOKING BACK: WHAT DID HE MEAN BY POWER?

Have you noticed how some people are just natural leaders? Whether they are working in an office, joining a trade union, taking their child to school or singing in a choir, they will, without any apparent effort, become the Office Manager, the Shop Steward, the Chairman of the PTA and the lead singer.

I remember when I was at Secondary School, a girl called Linda joined our class halfway through Year 7. From the very first she came across as far more glamorous and sophisticated than the rest of us and it was not long before she was the unofficial leader in any activity that counted. In a drama lesson once, we had act out a story. Linda had left the room for a few moments and, as we discussed who was going to take which part, one girl said that it might be nice if, just for once, Linda did not take the lead. But another girl shook her head. *It does not matter which part you give Linda, she said, even if she is only second servant, she will still be the star.* And she was. Our story was the one about King Edward and Queen Philippa where the burghers of Calais (that is burghers with an “h,” as in city officials, not Macdonalds) are under arrest for rebellion and Queen Philippa pleads with King Edward to spare their lives. Linda was only something like “fifth burgher” in line but somehow the fifth burgher was in the spotlight far more than either the King or the Queen. Some people are like that. They have strength; they have confidence; they have charisma. They automatically take the lead.

James and John were brothers, living in Roman-occupied Palestine during the first century AD. Being sons of a fisherman they had joined their father in the family business. But when they met Jesus, this radical new religious leader, teacher and healer, they left their home to follow him for three years. Jesus had a group of twelve men as his disciples and whenever the group is mentioned, the names of James and John are always at the forefront. They were obviously at the centre of everything. So in some ways that request they made to Jesus was a natural one. They had got the idea that one day Jesus would rule the world, just as the Roman Emperor now ruled most of their known world. *We are the leaders of your gang now Jesus; so may we assume that we will be the leaders in the future, when you are talking big power?* And you can imagine the other disciples muttering in the background, saying what that girl said about Linda, *well, wherever you put James and John they will end up in the forefront. Even if they are only washing the floors of the royal palace, they will behave as though they are the Lord Chancellor and the Prime Minister. They are like that. Jesus might just as well give in now.*

But Jesus did not give in, did he? He said that their ideas of power and leadership were not his ideas. *If you want to be great, you must learn to be humble. If you want to lead in my way, you must learn to serve.* Bit of a let-down really.....
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I don't know about you, but I have to say that that particular image of Christianity does not sound awfully attractive to me. It conjures up a picture of this group of incredibly wet men and women, wearing incredibly boring clothes, sitting around looking incredibly pathetic, saying, *after you, no after you, no after you,* while the rest of the world just gets on and ignores them.

We need strong leaders in every aspect of life. We need people with a bit of clout to get things done, make things happen. We might grumble about leaders who seem to

All the New Testament writers were struggling with this. We still struggle with it. Why are basically good, God-fearing people made to suffer by sick-minded, evil men and women?

But as they looked back over everything Jesus had said and what he had done, they tried to make some sense of it: what did he mean by power?

The root of true power lies within you, doesn't it? It is not something which other people can give you. Even if your partner or your friends or your colleagues hand you responsibility for their lives and well-being, if you are not strong enough inside, then you will not cope with it. And if you grab authority over other people, coercing them into doing what you want, that is no sign that you have real power and sooner or later everyone is going to realise that as you start to fall apart every time you don't get your own way.

Real power is about recognising your own worth; it is about being able to accept yourself for what you are and acknowledging that you have your place in the world. And although that sounds easy enough, it is almost impossible to achieve. I have never met anyone who does not have a certain amount of personal insecurity and most people have personal insecurity in spades.

And no matter how many self-awareness courses we go on, we cannot quite achieve and maintain that sense of self-worth for ourselves and no matter how many loving friends or adoring fans we may have, they cannot give it to us either, not indefinitely.

Jesus knew this and what he taught was that only God can give us that inner power which comes from recognising our worth in his eyes. And only God can give us the constant renewal of our worth because he has the strength of love to forgive and restore when we get things wrong. Only God can make and keep us secure about who we are and what we are doing.

This power had nothing to do with the angry bluster of James and John, nor the arrogant dictatorship of the Roman Emperor. Nor was it about sitting around being very pathetic. Jesus did not go for that either. This power was about accepting your worth in the eyes of God and your right to live as a child of God.

And, if you think about it, which would you really rather be: the person who suffers but remains secure in his faith and intrinsic self-worth or the person who is so scared of losing his social and political position that he is prepared to nail human beings to a cross or throw them to be savaged by wild animals?

You don't need that kind of power. The world does not need that kind of power.

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And this brings us, finally, to where we are today. Why would seven very different people, from a variety of backgrounds choose to become members of a Christian church? Especially in this day and age, when church membership is more likely to be a hindrance than a help when it comes to employment, social standing, family life, credibility in general? You think, have these people not got lives?

They have lives alright; I can vouch for that. If it was difficult getting all seven together in one room on enough occasions to discuss Christianity and church membership thoroughly, it was almost impossible to find a Communion Service when all seven would be in this church together. In the Year 2009, we had two options: May or October. So yes, everybody in the front rows here certainly has a life.

So what are they looking for then? They are looking for power, the kind of power which no-one else can give them and nor can they create it for themselves. They are looking for a power that is greater than they are and yet which will affirm them as people of worth, with lives that are worth living.

They have found that power in God as he was revealed in Jesus Christ.

They have accepted God's unconquerable love for them in Jesus;

they have learned to trust in God's power to save them from that destructive force we call "sin" which is in them and in life;

they have been drawn to a Christian community which they believe will help and encourage them in developing real personal power, rather than what passes for power in our culture of money, sex and celebrity;

they have discovered within themselves a passion to make a difference to the world, to be movers and shakers in the name of Jesus Christ and in the way of Jesus Christ.

So they come today to say in front of us all, "*By the grace of God, this is who I am and this is where I choose to be.*" (And that, to me, sounds pretty powerful)

And do you know what happened to James and John in the end? James was one of those executed for his faith quite early on and after going ballistic when a village refused them hospitality, how would you have expected John to turn out when his own brother was brutally executed? You would expect him- quite understandably- to become a very angry man, filled with hate, taking out that hatred on anybody and everybody until finally it killed him too. But you read his letters in the New Testament. Their whole message is about the power of God's love and the strength of that love in us. John lived to a ripe old age, becoming one of the most influential, yet gentle and beloved leaders in the whole church. He had come a long way since he demanded a throne of authority in the kingdom of heaven.

He got his power alright but it was not the power of the world. It was the power of Christ and that, at the end of the day, was what he truly needed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.