



## **"WE'VE GOT THE POWER"**

**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021**

Mark 6:14-29

There's a meme online of Senator Palpatine from Stars Wars with two pictures of him: in the first one he's the Chancellor of the Republic, a benign and somewhat distinguished older gentleman with grey hair; in the second he's been transformed into the emperor of the new galactic Empire, now looking quite frightening with dark circles around his eyes and the bone structure of his face visible beneath his skin. The caption under the first says, 'Politicians before they get elected' and quotes him as saying, "I love democracy; I love the Republic."

The caption under the second says, 'Politicians after they get elected' and has him saying, "I have the power; unlimited power." The desire for unlimited power, the desire to exercise control, the desire to be in charge, is a major source of the world's problems.

Galadriel, at the beginning of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, says, "The race of men, who above all else desire power."

American Episcopal priest and theology professor, Ephraim Radner, in his book, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality and the Shape of a Human Life* argues that, in the West we're living through a "Great Transition." Our expectations of life and health and so on, have been altered. Rowan Williams, in a review of Radner's book, says this means we are less and less capable of seeing our lives as following a God-given trajectory, i.e., birth, generation, and death which constitute the way God gives us of being human. From a Christian point of view, we keep growing in our humanity to the point at which we resign our lives into God's hands for a "Great Transfiguration." Williams says, that this journey for Christians is modelled on that of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to accept the incarnate Christ as the one who marks out the shape of human life lived under grace.

This includes a joyful and obedient awareness of limitation. Our temptation in the modern world is to treat every real or supposed limitation as a sort of insult to our liberty, our creativity and our dignity. How dare anyone presume to tell me I can't send text messages while I'm driving. I read in *The Open Road* some letters complaining about the trend to cross unbroken double lines instead of staying on our side. It's treated like a suggestion. More consequential than that, we want to choose when we will die. Or when the inconvenience of an unwanted pregnancy will be terminated.

"We prize the self-directed, self-constructed identity over against what is slowly and painstakingly woven in the interaction between what is received and what is decided or chosen." We are losing a sense of narrative in our humanity. We want the power.

In international politics, names like Erdogan, Duterte, Kim, Xi, Trump, Putin are just some examples today of Lord Acton's famous saying, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

When Adam and Eve were approached by the serpent they were told they could be like God if they ate of the forbidden fruit. Tantalizing.

The desire for power is the desire to be like God who alone has absolute power. Accepting our limitations is to accept that we are not God. We are reminded every day by the realities of our existence like gravity and mortality, that we're limited.

Jesus said we can't add one inch to our height simply by willing it. St Paul yearned to do the right thing but instead he did what he didn't want to do. It's the same with us. The Bible says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord." God gives us power over some things but not others. Could it be that we're not good at handling power? If I'm treated unjustly by someone and then I try to pay them back by meting out just retribution, I may be kidding myself that I'm acting justly and doing it for their own good. In reality it just makes me feel good because I'm getting my own back. We have trouble being honest about our inmost thoughts and how they're translated into actions.

In our society we have technology, we're well-fed, we have nice houses to live in, we drive nice cars, our children and grandchildren attend good schools. I'm very grateful to have been fortunate in my life. But in 1982, we were in recession.

Twice that year I was retrenched. When you're jobless, you feel powerless. But that whole year, I had a roof over my head, and I never had to worry about where my next meal was coming from.

Thanks to technology and advances in science, medicine, and surgery, we have increased our knowledge and "knowledge is power." We have gained control over many deadly diseases. Tuberculosis, Smallpox, Polio and even Measles were once

feared as probable death sentences. I went to the dentist last Monday and felt so grateful for modern dental surgery.

Teeth once made life a living hell for many people. All this is wonderful and thank God for it. Yet there is a danger that we become overblown by our achievements and start to think we're omnipotent, like God. Has the COVID-19 pandemic at least shaken us out of some of our illusions?

Today's Gospel relates a tragic event. All four Gospels begin with John the Baptist who foretold the coming of the Messiah. But John doesn't last long. He recognises that "He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease." It doesn't take long for him to leave the scene. And it's a violent exit.

John had preached out in the Judean wilderness, calling people to repent and be baptized to prepare the way for the coming of the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. He was a powerful figure. Back in Judea was another powerful voice. John's power was moral and spiritual. Herod's power was political and violent. As in all political systems, when his power was threatened, he responded with violence.

John criticised Herod who had divorced his wife and Herodias who had divorced her husband, so she and Herod could marry each other. So, she was no fan of this meddling prophet who fearlessly told the truth. But it cost John his life. John was driven by his call to speak the truth, to proclaim the word of God. Herod silenced John using the power of the Roman Empire.

Listen to the news or read history. The one with the sharpest sword or the fastest gun or the biggest bomb ends up as the winner. You don't have to go to church or read the Bible to discover that. It doesn't have to be proved. It's a fact.

What we might miss if we don't read between the lines is that there are different forms of power.

Herod is powerful enough to lose half his kingdom if that's what the girls asks. He can order someone's head to be cut off and it's done. What power!

Yet because of a rash promise he must give in to a young girl's request. He didn't want John killed. Is that power?

There's great irony here. Herod had John killed to shut him up. Yet throughout history, John is a model of courage and Herod the epitome of cowardice. Despite their best efforts, the Herods of this world cannot silence the gospel. Who has real power? What is real power?

The story of John closes with an account of his burial. John apparently had no family, so it was left up to his disciples. Why does Mark include this small detail? Giving him a decent burial was a courageous thing to do, because anyone who had been executed by the government was an enemy of the state.

Herod thought he had put an end to this nuisance once and for all. Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders thought they had silenced Jesus once and for all. But the preaching and the gospel and the courage continues. They cannot be silenced.

Every time you speak up for love instead of hate; every time you stand up for justice instead of injustice; every time you stand up for truth instead of falsehood, you are a vehicle through which Jesus is subverting the old world and creating a new one through you. That's true power.

Fr Mark