



The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
5 July 2015

Power in Weakness

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Ezekiel 2.1-5; 2 Corinthians 12.2-10; Mark 6.1-13

Christians, on the whole, are confused about power. In the gospels we read Jesus saying, 'Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'; and in today's epistle Paul hears God telling him, 'Power is made perfect in weakness.' But interpreting such passages has got the church in all kinds of trouble. Is there something wrong with power? Or is there a good kind of power and a bad kind of power? And is weakness a good kind of power or is it the opposite of power? I want today to explore power and weakness to discover where answers to such questions might lie.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes described power as our 'present means, to obtain some future apparent good.' (*Leviathan* ch 10). In other words it's real, but it's fully realised in the future – so more than anything it's potential. It's also not worth having for its own sake – it's only a route to something more important.

By this understanding, we can identify broadly three kinds of power. The first is social. Initially it's about resources. Whether those be food, diamonds, or access to fresh water; maybe social capital or intellectual property; perhaps a network of contacts or a reputation for fair dealing; whatever it is, becoming powerful is about commodifying and making transferable such resources. But then it's about developing an informal organisation or obtaining a place in an established institution that gives you maximum influence over the distribution and use of such resources. For many people, what makes the world go round is the accumulation of resources and the navigation or manipulation of the structures by which those resources are distributed.

The second kind of power is personal. This is about things that can't be commodified and transferred – things like charisma, attractiveness, expertise, charm, magnetism, courage, the ability to persuade or endure or inspire. A few years ago Rolls Royce did a survey of which of their managers had risen to the top and why. The answer lay not in qualifications or starting salary. It lay in the ability to communicate vision and build a team. If you think about the game Rock, Paper, Scissors, simply to concentrate on the first kind of power is to choose rock every time. You're going to be outflanked by the person whose psychology in the end makes them intuit when to say paper and scissors.

The third kind of power is physical. For all the acquisition of resources or the winsomeness of particular people, a gun, in the hands of a radicalised man on a Tunisian beach or a white supremacist in a South Carolina church, can exercise a lot of power and do untold damage. The point to note is that physical force can work even in the absence of the first two kinds of power; and, more subtly, those lacking the first two kinds of power may be more inclined to resort to violent force since it could be the only kind of power they have. Force has the ability to destroy, but not to build. You can see the use of force as a breaking of the rules or an admission of failure – it's a sign that a person or organisation hasn't acquired enough of the first two kinds of power to obtain what Hobbes called the 'future apparent good' it was looking for.

One illustration may show the complexity of power in society today. A friend of mine found his apartment block was experiencing a spate of burglaries. It was clear someone was leaping over the seven-foot wall that separated the building from the main road where a bus stop provided a launch-

pad for the intrepid and athletic would-be burglar. One afternoon my friend went up a ladder to fix a security device to the window of his first floor flat. Suddenly he saw an eight-year-old boy leap into the courtyard and instantly he realised here was the culprit. My friend jumped off the ladder and cornered the boy against the wall adjoining the bus stop. My friend had some institutional power, in that he clearly had the law on his side. He had no personal power, because the boy clearly had no respect for him whatsoever. Suddenly the boy screamed, so the whole street could hear him, 'There's a man – and he's trying to grab me goolies!' My friend froze. The boy was able simply to run away. What the boy had done was not to use force, but to use a clever and subversive lie that had the power of force, leaving my friend outmanoeuvred and powerless – like Goliath, ponderous and clumsy, feeling the other party had cheated but with no court of appeal to turn to.

If these are broadly the three kinds of power, what are we to make of weakness? In simple terms, weakness is having little or no capacity of resources, skill, or force to obtain any future apparent good you might be hoping for. When a person says, 'Don't grow old,' they're not usually saying 'Don't get closer to death'; they're saying, 'Growing old means losing social, personal and physical power.'

It's been fashionable in the church for quite some time to criticise power and to exalt weakness. I'm suspicious of this trend. Rather too often it isn't a critique of power at all, just an assertion of the second kind over the first and third. Sometimes when people say they hate the church but they admire Jesus as a great moral teacher, they're saying they disapprove of institutional authority and organisational influence and want all power to be personal. Likewise, when people say they're fed up with politics-as-usual, it sometimes reflects an unwillingness to do the hard yards of organising stakeholders or committing to long-term goals. The trouble with this is that it leads to a perpetual adolescence where no one is working to build institutions that transfer wisdom from past to future. Other times exalting weakness can be a passive-aggressive ploy that's simply looking for a change of person holding the power. There's no guarantee the person talking up weakness will exercise power any more appropriately than the person they're criticising.

Meanwhile when personal power is all that counts, the scenario of the eight-year-old boy near the bus stop plays out over and over again: people are exposed to constant manipulation by those who are unscrupulous about transgressing social conventions and cultural signifiers. All of this suspicion of power has created a generation or two of leaders who have few role models in the creating of organisations and building of institutions, who possess no positive vocabulary of power that distinguishes it from force, corruption or manipulation, and who consequently do less damage through reckless use of intoxicating power than through naïveté and ignorance of the power they actually have.

So what are Jesus and Paul really saying? What possible sense does it make to exalt weakness? The answer lies in the imagination. If you have colossal amounts of material resources, personal magnetism, or weapons, you don't need an imagination. What generally happens is that your imagination gets flabby and sleepy, such that when you really need it it's no good to you. The value of weakness is that it redirects you from the power that fades to the power that never fades. What the world calls weakness is really an invitation to unlock the limitless potential of the imagination. A life not spent trying to accumulate power can release untold dimensions of creativity. The imagination reconfigures things in a new story, with new allies, and a new kind of power.

Imagination drawn out of weakness unearths first of all the power of the church. It's simple: if you have all three kinds of power, you probably don't realise your need of anyone else. Weakness alerts you to what you should have known all along: life isn't a game you can play alone. Poverty, disability, sickness, old age, infancy, debt – these conventional forms of weakness create the church, because they incline us to turn to one another for support, and before long we've built a network of relationships much richer than any one conventionally powerful person could ever

know. Our fragility and failures push us to acknowledge before one another need, brokenness, compulsions and addictions, all of which deliver us into one another's hands not for exploitation but for solidarity, not for ridicule but for generosity, not for humiliation but for companionship. Weakness brings about friendship, insight, forbearance, and the release of the gifts of others. It births community and renews a common sense of humanity.

And the other thing imagination drawn out of weakness unearths is the nearness of God. There's a sense in which we can see all our quests for power as idolatrous and ultimately futile attempts to prevent ourselves falling into the hands of God. What baptism does is to strip us of every pretension, every defence, every illusion that in fact we have any abiding power; and to embody the truth that in the end we are and will forever be whatever God chooses to make of us. And this finally is how we make sense of the words of today's epistle, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' All power is an attempt to delay, distance, defuse or deny our total, utter and ultimate powerlessness in the face of God. To say power's made perfect in weakness is to say only in weakness can we truly acknowledge and confess that we are entirely at the mercy of God. The cross of Christ is, at the same time, both a pitiful attempt to defeat God using all three kinds of conventional power, and the definitive expression of grace made perfect in weakness.

Power isn't itself a bad thing. It becomes a bad thing when it issues in violent force, when it becomes a way of living without the church or God, or when we succumb to an impulse to go on accumulating power without turning it into something genuinely good. Weakness makes us vulnerable and afraid, but it can become a good thing if it releases our imagination to discover the church and see God.

And only when we do that can we discover that God's power is none of the three conventional kinds. God isn't finally huge or overwhelming or violent: God is grace – God is bottomless, limitless, unearned, unmerited gift. Here's the crucial difference: for us, power is about Pontius Pilate – accumulating potential, stockpiling resources, influence, and might; but for God, grace is about the cross of Christ – constantly emptying and giving away. We discover God when our power runs out, when we thought we'd given all we had, when we'd reached the end of our strength – and yet there is more.

For us, power is limited and giving it away risks our becoming weak and powerless. We live in constant anxiety that we'll never have enough to be secure. But God isn't a diminishing resource. God never runs out. Countless advertisers have called their product 'the gift that keeps on giving' since the phrase was first used about the phonograph in 1924. But the truth is, the gift that keeps on giving is God.