

Living as Christians in a complex world - Session 7 Power

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

“With great power comes great responsibility” - a phrase popularised by the character Uncle Ben in the movie Spider-Man. We're probably all familiar with the words of Lord Acton, the 19th century British historian who declared: “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

How do we handle power? Does it have to be that way - corrupting, self-serving, oppressive and ruthless? Many of us know from our own experience that significant ethical issues can arise from an imbalance in power dynamics – both between myself and a service user and between myself and another professional. Leaders have a unique opportunity to shape an ethical environment in the workplace because they have access to power

Power has been defined as “the ability to do things, by virtue of strength, skill, resources, or authorisation.” Whether we look at government, schools, businesses, churches - even families - it often seems that things go well when there's a strong, clear lead “from the top”. And that's all very well until the person in the lead forgets that the locomotive leading the train has to remain attached to the cars.

Power, sadly, though it is often the means to get things done, it all too often is either abused, or abdicated. And in either extreme, we feel let down and become cynical. Yet the truth is, all power comes from God and is given -or delegated - to human beings. How it is then used depends on how faithful those human beings are to God.

At the outset of creation, humans were given dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, cattle, wild animals and every creeping thing. But with that power came an awesome responsibility and stewardship.

That's how power is - bestowed upon us, in whatever capacity, and packaged with a vocation, a responsibility, to use it wisely and faithfully.

Fortunately, although we see in the Bible some instances of terrible misuse of power, we are also given some examples of how power can be used well. Joseph is a good example. In Genesis 39 we read how he was put in charge of the household of Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials . It says “The Lord granted him success in everything he did”. He maintained his integrity, even when tempted by Potiphar's wife; when he was placed in prison under a false allegation, he again found favour and was put in charge of all those held in the prison. And in time he became the Pharaoh's interpret of dreams and found honour and grace with Pharaoh - so much so that he was promoted again to serve in Pharaoh's palace and over all the people. “Only with respect to the throne,” said Pharaoh, “will I be greater than you”. He dressed Joseph in fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He placed his own signet ring on Joseph's finger and gave him a chariot - so Joseph had all the trappings of power - his own ministerial driver, his own palace pass, and all the authority he needed to govern.

And we see how Joseph displayed wisdom, foresight, patience, integrity in his dealings not only with the people, but with his own brothers.

Another example is Daniel. Forced into King Nebuchadnezzar's service as a “young man without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand and qualified to serve” he was groomed for power, and because of his proven integrity,

promoted and appointed as the King's most senior Civil Servant. Powerful, because he spoke truth to power. Powerful, because he was faithful to God.

There are other examples that provide some salutary lessons on how not to use power. For example, David, the shepherd who became king. So much of what he did was brave and good - yet there was a moment when he abused that power to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba, and he took the opportunity to use his power to place her husband in a position of danger where he would be killed in battle. Oh how he regretted that moment of abused power!

For power to work well, there need to be checks and balances to reduce the chances of abuse. That is why prophets were sent to curb the excesses of the ruling judges and corrupt priests. They, too, spoke truth to power - though they were often ignored.

Now, what else does the Bible tells about power? All power comes from - and is subject to - God.

"Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all" (1 Chronicles 29:11-12).

Many Old Testament passages speak of God giving His power to the weak: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak" (Isaiah 40:29). Psalm 68:35 says God gives power to His people: "You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people. Praise be to God!"

And, of course, when Jesus of Nazareth came, he confused all the expectations of those who were expecting the arrival of the true king. His arrival as a refugee in a poor stable, born to an obscure family, was not what people thought would happen. Even those who believed that God would now take charge and become king in the way they had always wanted were taken by surprise. But when he began to perform powerful deeds and miracles, the people already in power were alarmed, and became furious. They could see that he had an authority which impinged on their own power.

In the Gospels we see on the one hand a Roman governor in all his power, exercising power in a worldly kingdom, and so able to kill one man and release another just as he pleases. And on the other, we have a vulnerable man, the subject of taunting and mockery, dressed up as a fake king - yet his kingdom is not of this world - he is the Lord of Creation, the King of Israel, the Word made Flesh who has laid aside his majesty. The one who had power to lay down his own life; and ultimately to rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. The Bible speaks of the power of the resurrection.

So we have 2 very different kinds of power - one recognised by this world, the other an everlasting kingdom that comes from heaven and will ultimately take effect on earth - a kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

And there are a few pointers, too, about the power that is given to us as Christians. So, for example, any power we have to do anything in this life is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus told his disciples they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them, so we rely on that same power - no matter how talented, trained, energetic, enthusiastic we may be.

We are given strength which is renewed every day. (2 Cor 4:16). And any power we have is not our own but comes from Jesus Christ at work in us. And our strength is made perfect in weakness.

So bearing all that in mind, how should power be exercised? Given human weakness, vulnerability, limitations and our dependence upon God, then the duty to exercise power wisely is all the more challenging. The way that power is exercised ought to reflect the God from whom it emanates - God's generosity, God's outgoing love, God's willingness to share, God's willingness to work through others. A power exercised through giving, serving, loving; a power that witnesses to and proclaims the name of Jesus, changes and transforms lives, serves and equips others.

How much of *that* kind of power do we see in our world today?

Sadly so much of what we see is the very antithesis of that. We see oppression, bullying, manipulation, exploitation. And it's all too easy to look across at Afghanistan to see those kinds of behaviours blatantly manifested in the Taliban. Or we look back over history and see the worst excesses of power in Nazi Germany; or in Soviet Russia; or in Latin America. Abuses of power happen much closer to home. And they don't just happen in government circles or in big business communities. The power of technology can be abused. So can the power of media. These things are not bad in themselves, but we well know how the power of the internet can be abused and people's lives can be ruined through a careless or malicious Tweet or Facebook entry.

Abuses happen in homes, families, and yes - even churches. So much of what has been revealed in the context of safeguarding weaknesses in churches - whether physical, mental or spiritual - has stemmed from the abuse of power by people who proclaim the love of Jesus.

Of course, power is not all bad. Power can be used to confine or imprison, but it can also be used to liberate. Power can be used to spoil, disable and exploit - but it can also be used to enable, improve and transform.

It is important to recognise that human power has its limitations. There are some things against which we are powerless. We cannot abolish dying, for example. We cannot help everyone - much as we may desire to do so. We cannot predict the future. We are often powerless in the face of nature - although there are some things we can do to bring about greater stability, for example, in a changing climate.

Christians recognise that the exercise of power carries with it responsibility and accountability. Whether that power is exercised by participating in governing a community, or running a business enterprise, or heading up a school, or leading a church, we should always remember that power may be vested in a certain office, but holding that office must have the authorisation of the community as a whole. That's what I mean by accountability - the moment that power ceases to be exercised in the interests of the community, it is misused. And when power is misused for personal or factional purposes it ceases to have legitimacy.

It is worth again considering what Jesus taught about the use of power. In Matthew 20:25-28 we read: Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

In John 13:1-9 we read these words:

"It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

In an amazing - and to Simon Peter, a surprising - reversal of roles, Jesus exchanged the role of master for that of servant, insisting on treating his disciples not as servants but as friends. In John 15:15 he reinforces the same message: No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends."

The idea that the powerful should serve those under their authority may seem novel. But Jesus provides us with the supreme example of stooping down so that the poor and powerless may be built up, dignified, empowered and exalted. That is a rather different model of power than we often see around us. Can you think of any examples of powerful leaders who have used their power in this way?

Too often, power is used to control, coerce or make personal gain. But does power always corrupt? What do you think characterises the good use of power by Christians? Can you give some examples of Christians who used a position of power to good effect? For example, you may think of people with particular expertise, knowledge, experience, influence, connections, personality, ability to persuade - or simply have a legitimate right to command given their position, and have used that power well.

Spend some time considering those who hold authority in the church - bishops, priests, deacons, church wardens, leaders of different activities and organisations. Without naming individuals, can you identify examples of those who see their role as serving the community, enabling others to grow and become capable of taking greater responsibility? And what about other, less attractive examples - where church leaders have alienated congregations? How do you think this came about?

We conclude with the words of Paul in Ephesians 3:16-21:

"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."