

John 18:33-37

Reign of love

Inverted power

We are accustomed to power. Indeed, it is built into our way of thinking and living to such an extent that our whole way of life is disrupted when something happens to call it into question. We've seen recently unprecedented increases in the price of gas and electricity with almost certainly further increases to come later – with numerous energy companies going out of business. As I prepare this the pump price of fuel in Montrose has crept up to around £1.50 per litre, that's an eye-watering £6.75 per gallon for those older motorists who remember old money! But even that is nothing compared to the loss of power altogether. There is going to be more and more people in our communities who will have to face the unenviable choice between food and heat. We take ill should there be a temporary power cut due to a storm or for repairs. So much in modern life revolves around power. Threats to the regular electricity supply would be a catastrophe for us. And yet, in quite a few countries around the world, right now, there is at best only provision of the public electricity supply for several hours a day. And only the other week in one country there was no power on the public network for several days – and that is in a country that has a pretty modern infrastructure. Yes, maybe most of us in Montrose could cope with a one-off power cut for a couple of hours. We might even make a game of it with the kids – but on-going power outages are no joke for anyone. There are issues here of poverty and justice that need to be addressed. But actually, today's passage has nothing directly to say to us about our utilities and energy justice. It's speaking about power in a rather different sense. Jesus is before Pilate the governor, in the final few days before he went to the cross. Ostensibly and humanly speaking, the power lay entirely with the governor. High Roman official versus helpless prisoner. It wasn't just the contrast between Pilate's rich robes and Jesus' bloodied rags – Pilate held all the cards – he literally had the power of life and death over the apparently hapless prisoner who was just a step away from execution. And yet, Pilate was uncomfortable. Much as though he would have been loath to admit it, he sensed something special in Jesus. For this was not the run of mill desperate criminal, pleading, begging, grovelling for his life. In spite of his bedraggled appearance and being under the shadow of the cross, Jesus held his ground – calm, contented, at ease with life – not argumentative or belligerent – but with a serenity and deep-seated peace that defied his circumstances. Why? Because there was more to him than was obvious to the human eye. Jesus knew, as we know, that Pilate's power was limited. The over-arching “power” belonged to God who was working his purposes out in and through all the apparent might and authority of the governor. Pilate had no power beyond what God allowed him to have. And even as Jesus went to the cross – his end as far as the human authorities thought – he was to bring about the most dramatic change in history ever – he was to be the Saviour of the world.

“Are you a king?” Pilate pressed Jesus. He could only think in human terms – kingship then meant having power – backed by human might and military force.

Clearly, Jesus possessed none of that, yet he had the power of self-giving love which not only Pilate, but many, many people who've occupied mighty thrones or high office down through the centuries since, have never been able to properly understand. Jesus wasn't prepared to be sucked into a superficial discussion nor was he going to give Pilate any excuse to absolve himself of the responsibility for condemning him. He makes no claims to be king, knowing full well that Pilate would only have been able to understand kingship in terms of human power and might and would automatically have translated that into a threat against Caesar. "You say so" – Jesus throws things back to Pilate – he doesn't let him off the hook. Pilate just doesn't get it – he can't see that his earthly power and the might of the Roman army are helpless in the face of the heavenly power of self-giving love and Jesus' absolute trust in his heavenly Father. God inverts human power. God's power is made perfect in weakness – in his sacrifice on the cross, the Son of God enables the salvation of the world.

Reign of love

Some of our best loved hymns speak of the kingship or reign of God. The King of love my shepherd is. Praise to the Lord the king of creation. The Lord is King lift up your voice. O worship the King all glorious above. There are many more and, quite rightly, they are valued and well used – pointing to the absolute place of God over all human rulers. And while there is plenty in the Bible that speaks of God's position being made plain at the end of time, and of justice and truth being finally established, perhaps we are sometimes guilty of unwittingly transferring our understanding of power as human beings see it, to God. What I mean is that God is never going to utilise his power in an arbitrary or self-centred way. There is a place of justice and righting of wrongs but also for mercy and forgiveness. Surely, we have to see humility, grace, love and self-giving – qualities so obviously evidenced in the life of Jesus, as pointing to the qualities to be found in his and our heavenly Father. It's not as though God shows his love and mercy on earth in and through Jesus – not least by his readiness to give his life for us on the cross – and then somehow in heaven he becomes a raging tyrant intent on imposing retribution by force on all who have crossed him. Truth is more than not telling lies. Truth shows itself in a consistent behaviour that gives us the outward expression of inward integrity. If we don't display qualities of love and grace in the way we live out our lives before God and others, we can hardly claim to be true in our hearts. And that is so of God except that he IS truth – his actions ARE consistent – and our God in heaven will continue (as he has always done) to reflect the love and grace which his Son showed in his life on earth. God doesn't suddenly change to become a heavenly tyrant, however well meaning. That cannot be. As one of my professors said, there is no other God in heaven apart from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God cannot but act in love towards us. He can only be true to his nature. And his nature is to love and be merciful. So as today when the Christian church celebrates the reign of God and points to his kingship, let's not confuse the issue by assigning to God some of the dubious attitude and practices that many earthly monarchs have adopted, often at the cause of great hardship on their subjects. The Lord is King, yes, but he reigns with love and with a concern for the wellbeing of his people, in body, mind and soul, that would be of an

order unknown to earthly rulers. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that whoever trusts in him shall not perish. God IS powerful but in an altogether different way from what most people understand by the word power. We would do well to couple the word love to any talk of God and power for at its deepest level ALL God's power is related to his love. God reigns, but he reigns in love. And that means that both the way God exercises his authority and the way that WE, his people participate in it, can only be in love. Down through the years, that has been misunderstood and abused – as the force of arms associated with nominal Christian leaders has shunted out the love and mercy of God in Christ – and so we've had holy wars, the inquisition, the crusades and authorities even in Scottish history utilising the power of the state in anything but loving terms. God is always going to be loving. That is the only way that he can exercise his authority. His kingdom, his reign is demonstrated as his love is seen and experienced. When Jesus says Come, follow me, he isn't calling us to fight a holy war. Even when we're called to speak the truth to those in power, we've not to be hostile, aggressive or demanding – our words, our demeanour is to reflect Jesus' attitude to Pilate and in his readiness to give of himself in love, even to death on the cross.

It is so, so tempting to retaliate in kind, to push back against being pushed, to be hurtful as we reply to hurtful words, to seek to generate more of a response by drumming up the numbers, the arguments, the point scoring. But Jesus demonstrates that his way is the way of love, and that is the only way we can be sure of God's blessing. We can be true to Jesus' way if we are open to have his love in our hearts and by his Spirit's leading, have that love transform our lives, our churches, our communities so that God's reign of love, permeates through all of us and into every area of our lives and communities. The Lord is King, but he is the King of love and we will only participate and further his kingdom if we allow his reign of love to work in us and through us. Let's not hanker after human power and might – instead let us rely on Jesus – and his reign of love.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.