

Good Friday  
14/4/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:13-53:6  
Psalm 22  
John 19:1-16

### The source and goal of all power

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“Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”

With this Pilate spells out his understanding of the power at work in what is passing between him and Jesus at the judgement seat. Jesus responds, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” What, or who, is this “from above”? It seems obvious that it is God. Quite apart from the idea that God is “above”, this seems obvious to the familiar Christian sense that God *intends* something like this to take place, that God *intends* that Jesus be crucified, although this is not present here in the text.

But Jesus goes on: The power you have comes from above, but “the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin”. It is not quite clear who this “one” is. Obvious candidates include Judas or, more likely, the High Priest. But for our purposes this morning the Who is not all that important, only that a distinction is drawn: the one who handed Jesus over is not God. Jesus, then, seems to say *two* things here: God has given Pilate the power he has, and those who have made Jesus subject to that power have the greater sin. Typically, these two things are treated quite separately: God’s establishment of the political order for the well-being of human society (cf. Romans 13); and the sinfulness of the religious authorities in seeking to manipulate that power to have Jesus executed.

But the text is not that straightforward, in that the first comment about Pilate’s power coming “from” above is connected to the comment about the handing-over with a confusing “*therefore*”:

*‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’*

Put around the other way, the one who betrayed me is guilty *because* you have received power from above.

This is very difficult to decipher: God has given you power over me, therefore the one who betrayed me is guilty. This is difficult because *God* has given the power to Pilate but the *betrayed* is responsible for Jesus being subject to that power.

A clue to what this might mean is perhaps given in the gospel writer John’s love of double meanings which invite us both to distinguish meanings but also require us to hold them together. “You must be born again”, the teacher Nicodemus heard from Jesus (John 3), although the word “again” could also be translated “from above”. Nicodemus hears one of the possible meanings, and so doesn’t get it – he has to hear both. John uses this device not just to emphasise that Jesus’ hearers don’t get it; the problem is more that they only get *half* of it: Nicodemus needs to hear that it is a matter of being born “from above” but this a *re*-birth of the order of the birth which first brought you forth.

In our text this morning, the double meaning might be something like this: the power which Pilate receives can be said to come to him “from above” in the ultimate sense, in that God is the source of all power. And yet the power which he receives is also passed *down* to him in a progression from Judas to Annas to Caiaphas to Pilate. God is “above” Pilate but so also are those historical players. Jesus is apparently subject to two powers here – the good which is given to Pilate, the bad which is exercised by his enemies; and yet they are *one* power, which is the force of the “therefore”: you have power over me, therefore they are guilty.

This is not easy, but neither is the gospel, for we ourselves are very complicated. What is happening here is that, in the space of two sentences, John has compressed and summarised the dynamic of human power within its divine source and goal: sourced in God, realised in us. *Corrupted* in us, perhaps, but *still* power from God, even in its corrupt form: you have been given power, therefore you are guilty.

This gives rise to a question about what power actually is, about how we can *know* what true or appropriate power is if power can be corrupt and *still* be *God's* power. In one form or another we confess here most weeks that “We believe in one God, the Father, the *almighty*...” What does this *mean*? The seemingly *obvious* meaning is what gives rise to the heartfelt questions which follow on from the confession: God could do anything, so why then does God not *exercise* that power? Why do such things as this or that happen if God is both Good and *Almighty*?

An answer to that question which takes seriously the centrality of the cross to the Christian understanding of the power of God would be that the goodness of God is *not* that God is all powerful, in the sense of being able to do anything if he wanted to but, rather, that God is the source *and the goal* of all power. We might want to rage against this proposal because of what takes place between the source and its goal, but it seems to be the truth of the gospel.

God is the source *and the goal* of all power. It is that second part – the goal – which is missing in most of our thinking about God's power. That God is the *source* of all power has already been acknowledged in our text: “You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above”. That God is the *goal* of all power is the basis of the accusation against Jesus' opponents, who have used their power to secure the death of the beloved Son. *God's* goal is not the Son's death, despite our rich history of atonement theories which see the crucifixion as something God planned. God's goal is that the Son be glorified, that Jesus be seen to be the Son of the Father, and the Father – the one who sent him – seen to be the Father of the Jesus. The goal of God's power is always the establishment and manifestation of the appropriate relationship of God and creation.

But our story reveals that power has been corrupted and the goal of that power seems to be thwarted, for Jesus is crucified and so apparently demonstrated to be outside of a right relation to God. And yet the power of God is precisely the power of creation, the power to *establish* a relationship which was not there before. It is power to call into existence what is not yet there or, what is the same thing for us who are already “there”, creation is the power to raise the dead. In God's perspective, creation looks like making something from nothing; in ours, it looks like resurrection.

If the glorification of the Son – the manifestation of the Son's relation to the Father and Father's to the Son – is blocked by the deathly nothingness of the cross, then to such a creative God the *cross itself* becomes the glorification. And this is precisely what John's Jesus declares to us: the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (John 12.23);

Jesus will be glorified by being “lifted up” on the cross (12.32); the cross becomes a *throne*. The God from whom all power comes, even corrupt power, is all-powerful in that whatever comes of that power in the world, it always returns to its primary work: the glorification of God, the re-creation of the world.

Jesus knows the whence and the whither of power, whatever shape it takes. Pilate’s reading of power, then, and his religious enemies’ attempt to manipulate it, simply determine the *shape* God’s goal of manifesting his relation to the world will take as that power returns to him; they do not determine *whether* it will return to God. This is a given for the gospel. There is a sense in which Jesus is already dead as he stands before Pilate – dead to the dead end of Pilate’s understanding of power. The cross is a triumph, a glorification, because on it Jesus declares where all power comes from and where all power goes: only from and to the God who sent him.

What does this mean for anything? It means that the death of Jesus is no mere illustration of what bad people can do to good people. We don’t need a holiday to mark that; it’s in our news bulletins every day. Today is not a *tragic* day. It is a triumphant day – *Good* Friday, even *Great* Friday. The greatness of this day is that the goal of all power – the glorification of God in a right relationship to him is shown to be possible even in such a dark and deathly place as a cross. All power flows from God, all power returns to God, whatever dark and deathly vale it might force us to walk in the meantime.

What this “means for anything” is that there is nothing in this world to be feared. In all things we are more than conquerors through him who has revealed in this way the source and goal of all power. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth – not presidents nor global warming nor interest rates nor sovereign borders nor failing health nor broken hearts nor anything else in our power-confused creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. Romans 8.37-39).

Jesus, standing before all the power in the world, sees what it cannot: God started this and God will finish it. God has brought us here, and here God meets us and leads us on.

We need only confess in what deathly ways we have gotten power wrong and look to see in what astonishing way God will make it right. Resurrection from the dead, perhaps.

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