

SERMON: Sunday – 2 April 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Humble, Powerless, Trusting: Jesus - the final week

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Matthew 27:11-23

Pilate never saw the 'I am' before him.

And Jesus didn't argue with Pilate about that. '(he) made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.'

And according to Matthew, Jesus next words were his cry from the cross of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

In this final week, Jesus was resigned to his own powerlessness.

Yes we sing,

Ride on! Ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die; bow your meek head to mortal pain then take, O God, your power and reign

The words of the Palm Sunday hymn which we'll sing shortly, speaks of a power that paradoxically comes through giving up power.

In this final week Jesus chose to be without power, trusting in the One who holds all power, a higher power if you like.

Some of you will be familiar with the AA movement and the 12 step programme to recovery.

The very first step in that process is to admit that we are powerless.

1 We admitted we were powerless over (our addiction - it needn't be just alcohol) and that our lives had become unmanageable

(SLIDE)

I remember years ago being involved in a church which ran a Christian version of AA called Celebrate Recovery or CR for short.

I got involved a bit in that and it was a fantastic ministry of supportive, loving, humble people who knew that the first step to recovery was to stop denying they had a problem. The first step in any recovery or improvement is to

recognise that one has a problem which needs to be dealt with. Denial robs people of the opportunity to recover.

There's great power in admitting one's powerlessness - if you admit, you're admitted, you're accepted, and the people who came through CR discovered that and had an infectious hospitality as a result.

The second step in recovery movement is to come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

A Power greater than ourselves. A higher power. Now AA doesn't name that Power but its founder, Bill Wilson, had no doubt this was God. And CR is quite clear that it is God who is the Source behind real power.

The Irish writer, James Finlay was someone who discovered this Higher Power for himself. He hadn't known God any other way before coming to know God through admitting his own powerlessness.

In his own words this is how he put his coming to believe:

"You know, I don't know who you are, but I do know who you are: you're the one who saved my life. And I don't know who I am, either, but I do: I'm the one you saved".

Its that paradox of not knowing yet knowing that is so typical of the faith we're invited to live by. The same faith that Jesus breathed and lived, even in his cry of abandonment from the cross and his inner knowing of 'yet not my will be done but yours'.

Richard Rohr writes about this sense of not knowing as powerlessness. He reckons that it is in the recognising that we don't know how to love at all that actually keeps us on the path of love.

Constant failure at loving is ironically and paradoxically what keeps us learning how to love. When we think we're there, there's nothing to learn.

(SLIDE)

Catherine Chapman has written a book called Step Spirit: The 12 Steps as a Spiritual Program. In it she says that,

"Admitting our powerlessness frees us to allow the One who is Power to become active in our lives. We become more open to new ways of doing things as we allow God to love us and teach us how to give and receive love. We also begin to accept people and situations as they are.

As we realise we aren't in control, but God is in control, we are more able to detach from people and situations that are unhealthy for us, and accept these the way they are. This doesn't mean we quit caring. We care, but we don't allow the situation to determine our thoughts, actions and feelings.

Jesus accepted his powerlessness in the face of evil and despite his later cry of abandonment, I think he knew who was ultimately in control.

Wisdom appears early in the story of God; Creation would not be possible without 'her'. Wisdom is everywhere. In every part of Creation, she leaves her mark. Wisdom is with God from the beginning and forever. Wisdom is God, the One present at the rubicon moments: the place where choices are made, directions of travel are chosen, intentions are conceived and induced into actions which have consequences.

The question to ask might be: do we give God a place in these pivotal moments? Do we let Wisdom have her place and allow the infusion of Spirit to influence the choices we make in life, even if that is to choose whether or not to recognise our addictions or to accept that we are the ones not in control?

Wisdom is present at the threshold to everything ahead of us. Choosing to pay attention and be animated by God's wisdom is a defining moment, like Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem and trial before Pilate were defining moments in God's story of love.

In that moment of the joyous acknowledgement of the person and presence of Jesus as God's son, arriving in Jerusalem is a metaphor for God's self-revelation at the most crucial defining moment of life. In God, through Jesus, we see a different type of divine power to the stereotypical human power revealed too often in our world.

God's power is, nonetheless, effective against the systems of the world so at odds with God's intended Creation. In much the same way as Wisdom herself shows up at these moments of crux, Palm Sunday reminds us (much as Christmas does) that God is 'present' in these moments and God's power goes on ahead into the circumstances of the world that need attention.

We are left with a choice!

Do we join with this divine procession towards a restored world, or do we stay behind under the influence of a false wisdom that says we, or the world, knows best?

Would we continue to cry hosanna-save us whilst the world around about us is shouting crucify him?

It is a choice that, perhaps surprisingly we see being played out in the dream life of Pilate's wife as she beseeches her husband not to get involved in the political games that were afoot over Jesus' arrest and the desire of some to have him executed.

She, un-named, knows Jesus to be innocent and fears the outcome of sending an innocent man to his death. Her wisdom and appeal to Pilate, however, are not heeded over the shouts of the crowd.

The text says,

19 While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

Many have speculated on the source of the dream. Was it from God? Saint Augustine said it was. And the Eastern church went as far as making her a saint, Saint Procla, whose story is further embellished in the Gospel of Nicodemus, a (probably) 5th century apocryphal book.

Centuries later, during the Reformation, John Calvin agreed whereas Martin Luther said her dream was from the devil because it aimed at preventing salvation.

According to the text, Pilate ignores his wife, which as we married men know is rarely the right response.

Pilate may have washed the blood off his hands but were his hands really tied? He did have a choice didn't he?

Did he do all he could to do the right thing? Did he have to submit to the crowd baying for blood? Did he need to place the fate of Jesus into the hands of blood thirsty men whilst lady wisdom looked on?

22 "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

Surely he knew that they'd respond with shouts of 'crucify him!'.

Why ignore wisdom? Could he not see the possibility of wisdom shouting to him in the counsel of his wife?

If wisdom is so obvious that she is like a voice shouting out at the entrance to the city, why does it so often go un-lived by?

She is at the entrance to the city because her counsel is needed in the lives of all who dare enter.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10).

It's fear in the sense of awe, of recognition, of respect, of reverence.

We can't function well without this necessary foundation to everything we do and say.

Otherwise, we'll go mad with the shouting of the crowd and miss the whisper of love.

Jesus managed to live by that greater voice. And thanks to him, we can too.

Let us pray,
Humble
Powerless
Yet trusting
Knowing where control lies
The Way of Wisdom
The path of Jesus
Our path now
Amen