

Sermon given at Trinity Hall Evensong, 19 October 2014

Lectionary readings (NRSV): Ps 142; 1 John 3:16-4:6; Mark 10: 35-45.

Some words from the Gospel reading from Mark: 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all' (10: 42-43).

This is a surely a passage to concentrate the mind as the nation begins to gear up for next May's general election. In fact election fever is already upon us, with the Westminster political establishment still reeling from the closeness of a Yes vote in the Scottish independence referendum, and positively upended over the stunning victory of UKIP in a recent by-election. If there is a common message standing out from these two very different elections it is that there are significant sections of the British population who wish to protest against the experience of having been 'lorded over' by rulers who, they claim, rightly or wrongly, do not represent them but ride roughshod over their interests and dreams. Now that possibility of protest is, of course, the privilege of those living in a liberal democracy, where the people have at least some say over who will govern them and to what purpose. The millions living under the many authoritarian regimes around the world, or in the vicinity of those seeking to seize power by brutality and terror, will feel the force of Jesus' words far more acutely than we ever could living in our relatively just societies.

When Jesus speaks of Gentile rulers 'lording it over' them, his Jewish hearers would have known exactly what he meant. The Jewish nation had long been living under the oppressive heel of Roman imperial domination. Roman authority was administered through various appointed local despots – including three of the surviving sons of King Herod the Great, who was in power at the time of Jesus' birth. It was King Herod who ordered the murder of all the infant boys in Bethlehem when Jesus was introduced by the wise men from the east as the 'King of the Jews'. Three of Herod's other sons he did away with. The ambitious petty dictators who succeeded Herod were not quite as vicious as he was but they dominated their Jewish territories through varying combinations of manipulation, tactical tolerance and brutality.

When we keep this highly-charged political context in mind we can begin to feel the true force of Jesus' words. In fact that force is well conveyed in the New Revised Standard Version from which our passage was read. This not only speaks of Gentile rulers 'lording it over' their people, but also describes them as 'tyrants'. That may not be the most literal translation of the word in the original text, which is often translated more neutrally in other versions of the Bible as 'exercising authority over'. Not surprisingly, this less subversive wording is favoured by the King James Version – composed a time when the theory of the Divine Right of Kings sustained the official ideology of the English state. But when seen against the experience of oppressive Roman rule, the term 'tyrant' precisely

expresses Jesus' intended meaning. And this meaning is also confirmed in the thinly-veiled disdain we hear in Jesus' reference to Gentile rulers as 'those whom [Gentiles] recognize as their rulers' (v 42). Faithful Jews of Jesus' time did not recognize Roman rule as legitimate at all – which is why the Romans put down any rebellions with such violent efficiency. Jesus' meaning is underlined again two chapters later in Mark's gospel in his claim that we should 'render to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's' (12: 17). This famous phrase has been widely misunderstood down the ages. It has been taken to mean that there is a demarcated religious sphere of life where our duties to God belong, and alongside it a separate secular sphere where our duties to the state lie. But that cannot have been the meaning of a first-century Jewish rabbi living under Roman rule. The real thrust of Jesus's words there is that we owe everything to God and whatever authority the emperor happens to exercise now is on loan from God and is accountable to him.

But the critique of political oppression implicit in Jesus' words is not after all his main concern in this riveting conversation with his closest followers. The crux of what he says to the twelve disciples is: look, this is how the Gentiles govern, 'but it is not so among you' (v 43). Or, as other translation have it, 'it shall not be so among you'. The way of domination is not the way of the kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate. Recall the scene: two of the more ambitious disciples have come to him with a momentous request. They want to 'sit at his right hand and his left' – or, as the New English Bible better puts it, they want to 'sit in state' with Jesus, sharing the limelight in his kingdom: visible, esteemed, entitled to deference, authorised to command. Incidentally, in the account of this episode in Matthew's gospel, it isn't James and John doing the talking, it's actually their mother. She comes, kneeling before Jesus, and asks, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit [at your right hand and your left] in your kingdom' (Matt. 20:21). It would be fascinating to speculate on what this intriguing textual variation might mean, but that I must leave to your own imaginations.

In any event, James and John's shameless bid for pre-eminence infuriates the other disciples who might have their own eyes on the new power and status that the kingdom they think is coming might confer on them. But given the widely-held Jewish messianic expectations of the time, it's actually not so far-fetched that James and John want to be promised pride of place in the political kingdom they think Jesus is on the point of bringing in. Like most of Jesus' early followers, the first disciples would have understood the Messiah as the one who would finally fulfil God's promise of liberation to the Jews, overthrow Gentile oppression and restore to Israel national independence and political sovereignty. Then the people could be free again to live according to God's just laws, as they believed they had done under righteous King David, from whom Jesus was descended. Israel would then fulfil the very purpose of their election as a chosen nation, appointed to display God's righteousness before the world. And, of course, Jesus does indeed come preaching the arrival of the kingdom of God – this is the defining theme of his preaching. Nowhere does he suggest that this kingdom is a merely interior, spiritual reality with no

social or political implications. The kingdom he proclaims is nothing other than the restored rule of God over the whole creation. So it's hardly surprising that Jesus had such a hard time persuading even his closest followers that the kingdom he heralded was not a new territorial entity to be established by force, but something much more radical and potent – a new trans-national community of forgiven sinners, liberated from the urge to dominate others and thereby freed to live lives of mutual service and self-sacrifice, with transformative ramifications spilling out into every area of life, including politics.

But Jesus also teaches that this is a community that can only be ushered in by his *own* supreme act of self-sacrifice. In the verses immediately preceding our passage, he has just reminded his disciples of this awesome prospect for the third time, but clearly James and John have still not got the point. The next movement in the terrible drama he predicts begins in the very next chapter, when Jesus makes what commentators routinely misdescribe as his 'triumphal entry' into Jerusalem. For he is walking right into the eye of a perfect storm in which he will be rejected, betrayed, humiliated, flogged and executed on false charges. It is only later that his followers will grasp that, contrary to all appearances, this is not after all a defeat but a climactic and decisive triumph. As he says to his chastened disciples as they nurse their bruised egos, 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10: 45). That uniquely efficacious act of self-giving is then vindicated before the world in the resurrection. The resurrection is the declaration of God's ultimate triumph over all unjust domination, a declaration that reverberates throughout history right down to our times.

I spoke of God's 'ultimate triumph'. But, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us – a follower of Christ who himself died at the hands of the worst tyranny the world has ever known – we do not live in the ultimate, but in the penultimate, the time of waiting for the restoration of all things. In this age we only catch glimpses of that triumph here and there, signs of the kingdom. But yet we live in the promise that, when Jesus is finally declared the world's true Lord, that triumph will, as David puts it in Psalm 72, stretch from sea to sea – everywhere where unjust domination currently reigns. Could there be a more inspiring summons for us today to live so that more glimpses of God's coming just and gentle rule are caught sight of even now? And so to that end, and on behalf of all who suffer today under unjust rule, let us echo the prayer expressed by David in this evening's psalm, Psalm 142: 'Save me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. Bring me out of prison, so that I may give thanks to your name'.

Amen

Jonathan Chaplin