

He did not answer

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Revd Linda Anshell

Sunday 20th March 2005, Palm/Passion Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 31:9-18; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66 or 27:11-54

Jesus was silent (26:63); He did not answer (27:12)

he gave him no answer (27:14)

Here is a Jesus, who, like the suffering servant of Isaiah, has set his face like flint.

In Luke, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. It is a journey we have been on during Lent. But today marks the beginning of Holy Week and the journey is coming to its end.

Today, we hear of the stoniness, the quietness, the isolation, and inaction of Jesus in the passion narrative.

He had been teaching in the temple all week, but now, now they come at night to arrest him

now he is taken here, there, whipped, scourged...

he is silent before Pilate.

silent for a time, before the high priest...

Until he seals his own fate...

This is not a powerful actor in the world's eyes.

This Jesus does not act.

No sword is to be raised to defend him.

No word is said on his behalf.

No one to declare his innocence... unless it is Pilate's wife....

But this is not dissimilar to some of the stories we have been hearing during Lent.

Chris started our journey in the desert, with the desert fathers and mothers....

Rob has pointed out

- the woman at the well
- the man born blind
- even, perhaps, Lazarus, raised from the dead.

These are not powerful figures.

Certainly not powerful in their own societies.

The woman comes to the well avoiding contact, at a time when there is no one else there.

The man born blind is despised because his disability is seen as being "born in sin".

Lazarus, well, we don't know, but it seems he has no wife, he lives with his two sisters, it's a strange situation.

perhaps he has always been sick...

perhaps it is something else.

They are not powerful, (pro) active people, they have no positions of authority...

In Philippians:

In the incarnation, enfleshed, god emptied gods' self.

A god without power. empty, humble

emptied himself of all but love... the hymn says... [and can it be ...TIS 209]

power... it's a difficult idea.

Did the woman at the well have any power?

It would seem so as she tackles the big issues of theology with this thirsty Jewish man.

Did the man born blind have any power?

His parents thought so: "He is of age, ask him" they tell their questioners.

Did Jesus, have power as he stood waiting for the judgement?

Matthew's account has the powerful statement that leads to his condemnation for blasphemy ... "you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds"

Yes, he had power, even if it was only to incriminate himself. There was something else happening here. This is the god who was empty, was vulnerable...a god who died.

I am struggling here with power. A vulnerable god, who knows powerlessness, and yet....

The power to control is given up, divested, a slave has no power over any other person. Another angle on power comes from looking at relationship.

Relationship is the meeting together of individuals. Each individual brings their own personal power into a relationship. Inevitably many relationships have unequal power: teacher/student, boss/worker...

And the best relationships are not controlling ones, but where a mentor allows freedom to change and develop. A teacher draws out the imagination and creativity of the student, a boss organises so a worker can work; They encourage, enable, grow.

Throughout Lent we have been hearing stories from the gospels of people who are encouraged, tempted, beguiled... tantalised, into life, deeper life, deeper vision....

And it is this man, this empty, powerless god, who is inviting them into deeper life.

Some years ago I went on a retreat and in the months following all the cracks started to open up! I fell down a few of those cracks, and grew a lot in the process...but in pushing the boundaries I went too far for some. I ended up here at St Philip's and found a church that welcomed and included.

In what we do here I find that I have confidence in "church". In hearing talk of schism in the Anglican communion, that confidence is eroded! But then too, the responses of the supposedly errant provinces also gives me confidence that the Anglican church might preach a gospel that is truly good news, that liberates and enlivens, that does not seek to control....

Human societies organise themselves in various ways. Religion is just one. But human use of power in such organisations is usually to control and have power over other people. This is not a place to put god!

Religion may have two reasons for existence. One is to bind us together as family, as community... a place for individuals to belong, to grow...

In Dalziel and Pascoe on Friday, the Sikh constable says of family "family is important to us; without family you are shadow..."

Yes, it is important to belong. But religion and the community it creates can also be controlling, not enabling... Power can be used to control, to exclude, to name and denigrate... to vilify... in such a community I have no confidence.

Jesus was silent. He says very little at his trial, and nothing in his own defence. He tells his people to put up their swords. He goes to the cross.

And yet, we see here a powerful figure. Self possessed, waiting, quiet. The struggle of Gethsemane is finished. Only the cross remains.

This is the Jesus I meet in communion, "a sureground for faith a firm support for hope. In this Jesus I have confidence.

I conclude with the poetry of Hymn 174, starting at verse 4:

Drained is love in making full, Bound in setting others free, Poor in making many rich, weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who shows us God helpless hangs upon the tree; and the nails and crown of thorns tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God; no monarch he, throned in easy state to reign; here is God, whose arms of love, aching, spent, the world sustain.

— *WH Vanstone*



As I prepared for this sermon I was aware that there were ideas that had come from WH Vanstone's book "*The Stature of Waiting*". To check this I searched the web and a recent BBC Thought of the day had a useful comment on this work.