

Authority and Power

Christ the King, 24th November 2024

Daniel 7:9-10; 13-14

Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

While we're quick to criticise those in charge, at work, in politics, in Church, there are a bundle of motives at work. Of course, we may often be right. Leaders can do terrible wrong, be negligent, self serving, cruel. As another residential block collapses in Beirut, an international arrest warrant for Netanyahu and the Hamas leader seems rather obvious. Also, we may sometimes be pointing away from ourselves. Asking others to fix things can conceal our not taking responsibility ourselves. "They haven't done enough" we cry when the rivers burst their banks. What have we done ourselves in recent years in response to the climate crisis that leads to such extremities as we are now experiencing? "Fix the NHS" we demand, having consistently voted against progressive taxation rises in successive elections. Thirdly, knowing there is someone in charge gives us a sense of security, which includes the psychological release of anxiety by blaming someone for anything, letting off steam. I wonder if we can go even deeper and find a more primeval, soulful reason why we need people to blame. What if the blame reflex is an inverted expression of our desire to be judged kindly ourselves?

The book of Daniel, with comedic timing and cartoonish extravagance, portrayed the people in charge in the world as exotic beasts, with jumbled up characteristics of lion, eagle, bear, horns and horrible teeth. Yet still they had recognisable human characteristics. Often in Hebrew scripture, nature is seen as praising God, judging our apathy in worship. Daniel reverses this, holding up a mirror to leadership showing our bestial behaviour towards one another. All the way through the book, however, Daniel himself is shown not to be aloof from the world's affairs, but to be involved, acting with integrity as a civil servant trying to help even the worst leaders be their best. Now we reach a climactic moment where he is given a vision of a "human one" taking charge, radiant, an unquestionable authority, magnificent, yet definitely human. The elaborate description of attendants and fiery throne overwhelms the most lavish adornment of any earthly king. The fire of his judgement contrasts the cruel and pointless fire of punishment into which Daniel's three friends were thrown. The despots who have strutted through the story look shabby by comparison with this human one appearing to Daniel.

This vision, arising from Daniel's courageous struggle in the mess world of government, could be seen as a deep human longing for good authority, for wise and knowing authority, for the relief of good judgement of us all. It turns from the frightening bestial images of leadership to a beautiful human leadership that expresses our deep knowledge that human beings are fundamentally beautiful. Leadership and power too often twist us out of shape, making us ugly. But what if we could make it work? Daniel's desire that things be better is magnificently affirmed by this vision.

Another longing in the vision is for humanity to find unity. All languages, all peoples, all nations should serve this beatific leader, his kingship, unlike the unholy struggles across the region round Babylon, is one. Saying it "shall never be destroyed" is to affirm "this is how things should really be."

A fourth aspect of this longing, this vision, is the yearning for a figure who is both human and divine. This is not new, or unique to Judaeo-Christian faith. Think of the classical myths, such as Hercules, (Roman – part of Spain's founding mythology) [Heracles Greek] son of the god Jupiter and mortal Alcmena, a divine hero who was protector of the weak. Think of the talk of Roman emperors being divine. Some say the prevalence of divine/human across cultures somehow dilutes the Christian understanding of God's incarnation in Christ, but of course it does not. If there is a deep human longing at work, it's bound to be universal. Every religion is derived to some extent from the culture before and around it. That does not in any way diminish the power of it. That

gut level longing for a divine/human figure to come and help us make sense of the world is, I would suggest, the most obvious, natural desire to spring from our being made by a loving creator: made in the image of God, as Genesis puts it succinctly. We are made for love, and the more complicated we make the world with our power play, the more we ache for the perfect divine love we were made to enjoy.

Centuries after Daniel, a preacher from Nazareth who had caused enough of a stir to attract the attention of the Roman powers, was arrested and accused of claiming a kingship that, though rather pathetic and unarmed, was technically treasonous subversion of the authority of the Emperor and his little local kings. We overheard part of the interrogation by Pilate. All the power over life and death seems to lie in Pilate's hands. There is a dramatic undermining of him, though, in John's sophisticated text. The other religious powers that want to do away with Jesus are outside. While engaged in a filthy conspiracy to have an innocent man executed they stick to their purity laws about not entering the Roman palace. This leaves the big man Pilate scurrying in and out of his chamber, to talk to them. He is clearly exasperated. Imagine him muttering "Who do they think they are?"

When Pilate and Jesus talk about Kingship, Jesus points out the lack of armed followers. His Kingdom is nothing like Rome. We as readers of John remember that Jesus standing here is the Word made flesh. Through him all things were made. (Chapter 1) Talk about power over life and death. Although Jesus cuts a forlorn figure, John unsettles the powers, as with a deep sustained note in the film score we hardly notice at first, telling us something is coming. Pilate will next have Jesus flogged, he'll be given a crown of thorns and a Roman robe, then he'll present him to the religious authorities saying "I find no case against him...here is the man." This statue was unlike any other I've seen. While the sculptor chooses not to show the marks of flogging, I think in order for us to focus on his posture. Jesus is almost slumped, seated. Is he defeated or is he patient? Is he despairing or accepting? His face is so sad. Is that despair or resignation to the horrors to come or sadness at the ludicrous cruelty of competing human powers? Is he absorbed in his own predicament, or holding up a mirror to ours?

In Jesus of Nazareth, people had begun to experience the benevolent judgement of his gaze. Crucified by this Nebuchadnezzar-like capricious regime, he seemed to have been judged and defeated. His resurrection, however, became a lens through which his whole story read differently. Here was one who was not in thrall to earthly hierarchies. Looking back, the scene of Pilate and Jesus was reversed by that lens. Jesus was not standing before Pilate. Pilate was judged by Jesus' authoritative presence. Pilate's rule looked cruel and ridiculous. Jesus' authority looks benevolent, everlasting and glorious. Looking through the lens of resurrection, Jesus blood stained clothes and Pilate's shiny armour and insignia reverse. Pilate looks shabby and Jesus looks radiant. It didn't take long for Jesus to be recognised as the fulfilment of Daniel's dream. Revelation treats them as one and the same. This Human One meets our deepest longings, judges our human clumsiness, reflects our human beauty. Here at last is one worthy of obedience and worship. This, not the despot making nuclear threats, not the dispenser of land mines, not the two term president, is the authority that endures and will have the last word.

Remembering that Jesus was not detached, but immersed himself in the gritty reality of our political interaction; remembering that civil servant Daniel before him had rolled up his sleeves and tried to help the flawed regime find its best version of itself, we, too, are embroiled in the world and should be so. We are not called to be detached and aloof. Rather, in order to help our society be the best version of itself and our leaders be the best versions of themselves, we should try to look at them through the lens of Jesus' resurrection. See how they appear. Is there any good to be affirmed amidst the complexity? Does any cruelty need calling out? Who wields power and who glows with authority? See how often the two are not the same. Is there anyone presenting as glamorous who is really shabby and anyone looking beleaguered who actually ought

to be ascribed authority? How shabby is Asad, Netanyahu in their sharp suits? How stunningly authoritative is Gisèle Pelicot at the trial of her husband and fifty men who wielded sickening power over her.

The lens of resurrection also transforms what we see in Scripture, and how the church chooses to interpret it; what it chooses to highlight. My mum was a Kingdom person, though she didn't know it. She chose, with dignity and courage, to care all her life for someone close to her who treated her very badly. Having known great vulnerability, she chose with dignity and courage to protect the vulnerable. Her protective love for me and for all the pupils who flourished under her leadership gave a way of seeing the world. Exploring the Biblical world as we do here, her demeanour and the way she handled leadership make unexpected features stand out. Instead of the great moody general, it's his shrewd servant girl who comes to the fore, persuading Naaman to do the simple things that make life better. Instead of the Apostles dashing about in Acts, it's Dorcas she unknowingly makes you notice, convening a group of vulnerable women for fellowship and purposeful craft, like the Parents' Support Group Mum nurtured in her inner city school. It's not the fierce Prophet who stands out, so much as the widow of Zarapheth, suspicious of his religion but still sharing her precious water with him in a drought. It's not the miraculous opening of the prison doors that amazes, but the way the prisoners stay to check the jailer's all right. In her company, it's not Isaiah's loud passages about victory that dominate. Rather it's his image of God as mother dandling a child on her knee. I am immeasurably grateful for the revealing light she shone on people and things, ever since she dandled me on her knee. I wonder who your authority figures are. I wonder who prompts you to polish the resurrection lens and remember Jesus. Let them step forward in your imagination, see those human ones shine, and clear your vision, before heading out to get involved and make the world a kinder place.