

21st May 2023 – Ascension Day

Ephesians 1:19-23

THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE

When we think of power, what do we normally think of? We think of force, might, strength. In nature we might think of the force of a wave or the wind, the brute force of an elephant or rhinoceros, or an ant which can carry 10 to 50 times its own weight. Or we might think of a tree which clings and grows in a place we didn't think was possible. In relation to people, it might be a word we use to describe authority, coercion, forcing your will or your way upon others. It's a word we often associate with using your strength, whatever form that takes, to make sure things are done in the way you believe is best - political parties sometimes even talk about what they will do 'when we are in power'.

'Love' and 'power' then are two words we don't often use together, a bit like we said last week that we don't often use the words 'love' and 'obedience' together. Maybe that's because we tend to subscribe to the belief that, 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. And, we could argue, with good reason; that's what we see around us. Our experience is that when people are given power, as good as they might be to start with, this power goes to their head and they end up worrying only about themselves. I once read a book about King Henry the VIII, and in it people commented on how, when he was first crowned, he was a kind, compassionate and fair king. After having power for a number of years he ended up killing thousands of people, including persecuting the church, because he was so paranoid about any threats to his power. And of course, he also had a number of his own wives beheaded. In more recent times we have seen people like Hitler and Stalin, and in our own time Saddam Hussein and Robert Mugabe, who further reinforce our belief that with power comes a concern only about oneself, and certainly nothing that looks like love. Our perception is that even when people take on positions of leadership and authority with the best of intentions, at

least some of the time the power and authority which comes with these positions ‘goes to their head’, causing them to change how they think and act. And it is hard of course, isn’t it, because when you are in a leadership position you are never going to keep everyone happy all the time, so you are always open to the accusation of using your power for your own good.

So, for us, generally, power and love aren’t two words which complement one another. And yet, they are two themes which come out of this reading as Paul is talking about the love God shows to us through Jesus, and the power He gave Jesus when Jesus was taken up into heaven. But how is God’s power shown through Jesus? In a very different way to how we would demonstrate our power. God demonstrated His power in Jesus by firstly sending Him down to be born as a baby, that most helpless of beings, in an animal food trough in a stable. Doesn’t seem very powerful, does it? God showed His power in Jesus by the way that Jesus went around forgiving, healing, befriending people. Even though we see Jesus’ power over death, and sickness, and the storms, and even the devil, the strange thing was that He only ever used it for others, never for Himself. And Jesus also, finally, showed His power by allowing Himself to be arrested and executed, even though He was not guilty of any crime. This power is so different to what we would expect because it is so strongly linked to God’s love. As such, it doesn’t become corrupted, but is always used for the good of others.

And now, as we celebrate Ascension Day, we see the ultimate crowning, the glory, of all that Jesus has done. Forty days after He has risen from the dead, He takes His disciples out to a hill, and, after briefly speaking to them, He is taken up into the clouds and out of their sight. The work which God gave Jesus to do on earth is now complete, and now He is taken back to heaven, where He is given power over all things. The list of things Jesus is more powerful than is so complete that we can have no doubt that there is nothing which Jesus does not have power over. It includes both those things which are on God’s side, as well as those which are against Him. Considering how important Jesus’ Ascension is in the story of our relationship with God, the actual Ascension of Jesus wasn’t very spectacular. If God wanted to really make a show of it, He could have got a bigger audience, put on a light show, maybe had an army of angels in golden chariots to really make this event big.

But instead, like everything else in Jesus' life, it's not how spectacularly it's done which is important, but what is achieved by it. As Jesus returns to heaven, having done everything He was sent to do, God now gives Him supreme power of all things.

What Paul then gives us here at the beginning of Ephesians is the 'so what' of the Ascension. About two thousand years ago Jesus was raised up into heaven and given power over all things, but what does that mean for us now? What it means is that it's this same power which He is now able to work in our lives, he writes, 'I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers. It is the same wonderful power he used when he raised Christ from death and let him sit at his right side in heaven.' (v. 19-20). And why does this power come to us, His followers? For the good of the Church; so that just as Jesus now fills the Church, we can now also be used to bring others to know Him and His love. In love He uses His power for us. In love He now calls us to use His power for others.

The Ascension then is not just an historical event, but it's something we are linked to each day. As Christians we are members of the Church, which is the body with Jesus as its head. That's important, because sometimes we can look at the Church as being merely a human invention, and with its faults and failings wonder if it has an effectiveness and purpose. But the Church is named by God as being the body of Jesus, and being filled by all He is, including His loving power. It is this loving power of Jesus by which we know that we are forgiven; in love He came to die for us, in power He was raised from the dead. It's this loving power by which we know that He looks after us each day; in love He cares for us, and in power He can give us what we need in our daily lives. And it's this love which causes Him to want us to be with Him, and the power of the Holy Spirit which brings us to faith and so into His body. God's loving power, the same loving power He has shown through Jesus, is something we live in each day.

And the 'so what' of the Ascension is that we are now called to use that power to bring others to Him. But remember, it's not the kind of corrupting power that the world shows, but the loving power we see in Jesus. Sadly, the Church in the past, and us still as Christians sometimes today,

hasn't and doesn't get this power always right. It comes out in humility, as we are prepared to consider the needs and views of others, to understand before we judge, to consider before we dismiss. It comes out in forgiveness, as we forgive and move on instead of holding a grudge, as we see that the faults of others are no bigger than our own, as we take responsibility for our part in disagreements, and as we know that the forgiveness we give is nothing compared to what we receive. And it comes out in service. We show loving power when we look for how we can help others. Service is a listening ear, practical help, even helping people to feel wanted and accepted. We see service when we look at how Jesus lived His life on earth, always using His power for the good of others. These are three words which we wouldn't normally associate with power: humility, forgiveness, and service. But they are what God demonstrates to us through the loving power of Jesus. It is this loving power we are now called to use to both encourage one another and to help others to come to know Him too.

Ascension Day is very much the forgotten festival of our Church, and yet it is so important because it shows how the love and power of God are shown in Jesus for us, His body the Church. This isn't power that will ever be corrupted, because it is joined to the great and unending love of God for each one of us. May you live in and experience the power of God's love each day. And may He also use you to help others to know and experience it also. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What are some examples of power you can think of? In nature? People who have power?
- Reflect on how God demonstrates His power: In Creation. The way Jesus showed God's power in His life. The power of the Holy Spirit. How God works in the world today. How do we see and experience God's power at work?
- God's love is paired with His power. How do we know show this out in our lives: in the way we worship and follow God? In the way we share God's love with others?

Pray: thank God for the love and power He showed in Jesus, including taking Him back up to heaven in glory. Pray that we both know God's love and power in our lives, and also be looking for ways to show and share them with others.

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