

Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Easter Sunday
The Rev. Phillip A. Jackson Transcript

"Power Can No Longer Win"

Three groups vied for power 2,000 years ago: the autocracy, the theocracy, and an itinerant, charismatic preacher. Those in power did what they always did. "The leader shut it down in the only way a military autocracy knows: they had the person killed." Sparing no gory details, the Rev. Phillip A. Jackson, Rector of Trinity Church Wall Street, detailed the events surrounding Jesus's death and resurrection in his sermon on Easter Sunday.

"Power frequently looks like it wins, sounds like it wins. It can frighten and intimidate and kill. But power can't win! It can't win anymore because the tomb is empty. Because God raised Jesus from the dead. Because death is no more. There's nothing more to fear. Nothing more to hate. Power as we think of it can't win anymore."

The readings are Isaiah 65:17–25; Psalm 118; 1 Corinthians 15:19–26; and Luke 24:1–12.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Please be seated everyone.

Christ has risen. One more. Christ has risen. Beautiful, welcome, everyone. Good to see you. After these couple of years away, I think this is a testament to our need to be together. And that although Zoom can do many things, it can't do this praise God. I want to talk a little bit today about power. Actually, I want to talk more than a little bit about power. I want to talk about power and the forms of power that we see in the gospel, and therefore, the forms of power that we see in our lives. I want to start by telling you what happened to me on Good Friday. As I was listening to the choir chant the gospel from John, there was a part of it that really hit me, Chapter John 19, verse 31. And it's a strange throwaway unless you know what's going on but it's this. Now Jesus is on the cross with the two thieves on either side. And they've been up there for awhile. And the text reads this. Since it was the Day of Preparation, as the preparation for the Passover for the Jewish people, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. Now here's the verse that hit me. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. It just hit me, because frequently I think even in the church, we sanitize history, we sanitize what happened. And there is that little throwaway line that they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken. You know why? They asked for the legs to be broken because the form of death known as crucifixion was actually a torture. It was a torture that lead to death. And the condemned was usually nailed, sometimes just fastened to a cross beam. And they would frequently put a little ledge just underneath the feet of the condemned, because in crucifixion, the way you die is asphyxiation. You eventually can't hold yourself up any longer and you eventually just fall down, and you asphyxiate, you

can't breathe. But the Romans figured out that if you put a little ledge underneath there where the condemned can prop themselves up a little longer, it prolongs the agony and prolongs the death and the suffering.

And so this may sound strange to say, but what was being asked here was a mercy. How's that? Well, if you break their legs, and they would do it with a hammer or some sort of club, if you break the legs of the accused, the shins of the accused, guess what they can't do? They can't keep propping themselves up. So they hang and they die quicker. Imagine that little line. So they asked that the condemned's legs might be broken and the bodies removed, and that that was a mercy. There are three centers of power in our gospel story right now. There are three centers of power. The first is a imperial, nascent military autocracy, and that's wrong. Let us not forget that the emperor at the time was a man named Tiberius. And Tiberius was the second of the Augustine line. His adoptive father Augustus was the first king of Rome or emperor of Rome, although he styled himself princeps or first citizen, he was the first in 500 years. And the line was shaky. You may recall another instance in our particular branch of the Christian faith in which the lineage of a king was shaky and he felt the need to consolidate power. Who was that? Henry VIII and the tutors. So here you have Tiberius II of the Augustine line. And the line was both new from a family standpoint, but the line of having kings again in Rome was new, and they had to consolidate power. Rome was a military power, and do not ever forget that, it was a military power. Their strength derived not from arts and letters like the Greeks, it derived from war and power and the strength of their legions. And when Rome had a problem, they sent the legions to deal with it. And it was an empire at the time that stretched from Scotland to North Africa, from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, was the largest empire the world had seen to that point. And it was ruled by one man and his senators, the autocracy. There was a second center of power, and that was a divided Roman provincial theocracy. What do I mean by that? Rome was consisted of provinces.

There were provinces from the East to the West. One such province was the province of Judea. And that province, like all provinces, depended upon a local ruling elite to work alongside of the Romans, we might say in some ways be co-opted by them. You might call them people who benefited from the rule of Rome. In the case of Judea centered in Jerusalem, those people were a group called the Sadducees, they were the ruling elite, but they were divided. You hear about them in the Gospels, they're the Sadducees, they're the Pharisees, they're the e's Cyrenes. There are many other groups that we don't even hear about. There are many groups. It was divided, but it was a theocracy, theocracy revolving around God's rule purportedly through this group of highly influential leaders. There was a third center of power that almost bears not mentioning in the ways of power, and that third center revolved around an itinerant, charismatic preacher from the outer geographic fringe of that province of Judea. It was a small group, and I use this word precisely to reflect how they would've been seen in that time, a small group of Yokel followers. And that itinerant and charismatic preacher, his name was what? Jesus. The events recalled this week take place in the capital city of the theocracy at their holiest festival, when the city is jam-packed, and the military imperial autocracy is on high alert for trouble. And at the first sign of trouble, what does a military autocracy do? Shut it down. So when Group 2, that's the theocracy, perceives Group 3, that's Jesus and his group, as a threat to their power, which they did because he started talking all about how they didn't need the temple, how they didn't need to follow the law so closely, how they didn't need him, that was a threat directly to their power. So when Group 2 perceives that Group 3 is a threat to their power, they bring the leader of Group 3 to the leader of Group 1, and they declare him to be a threat to him. You get it? They say this man calls himself a king.

Caesar is the only King. You got to do something about this, not that we think so but you got to do something about this. What does the leader of Group 1 do? He shuts it down in the only way a nascent,

imperial military autocracy knows, have the problem kill. In this case, the itinerant, charismatic preacher from the North, the leader of Group 3, who he has summarily crucified, a death reserved for slaves. Back to John 19. Group 2 asks the leader of Group 1 for a favor. They're up on the cross. They go to Group 1's leader, Pontius Pilate and ask him for a favor. Can you break the legs of the crucified? Not as a mercy to the crucified, but because their presence on a holy day is awkward and unseemly, it's bringing us down. Could you speed it up and get them out? We'd appreciate that. So the leader of Group 1 complies because really after all, what does he really care? Does he really care? He doesn't. It's just sure. But the leader of Group 3, they discover is already dead so there's no need. Meanwhile and here's what's absolutely central for today, for the followers of the leader of Group 3, they thought power just did what it always does, it won. Power wins, power always wins. They had been happy for a while. They were traveling with Him for three years. He's healing people. He's thrown out demons. He's raising the dead. He's doing His thing, people are flocking to Him. They thought maybe He was the one we were expecting. Now, meanwhile, they're thinking like Group 2. They're thinking like the theocracy. They're thinking that they're going to take over the place of the theocracy with coincidentally, prime roles for themselves. Remember those comments on the way in into Jerusalem. Listen Jesus. He listened. When you come into your kingdom, could you put me and my brother at your right and left hand? Hey Jesus, we were just wondering, which one of us is the greatest? Hey Jesus, that town didn't really receive us. Could we call down an airstrike on them? Remember all that? They didn't get it.

They still saw power like power is and so when they see Him on the cross, they thought naturally, power wins. Of course, the show's over, done, the leader's dead and not only that, but they had better be careful lest power do to them what power does. Jesus, leader of Group 3, preached and lived for three years with that group teaching them an entirely different conception of power. One that He called what? The Kingdom of God. He called it the Kingdom of God and it consisted of service to others, walking alongside the poor, the marginal, total obedience to the will of God. In fact, just the night before He's hanging on the cross, Jesus is literally enacting and embodying for them what this new form of power is when He does what on Maundy Thursday? Washes their feet. He says, "This is power. This is what power looks like, serving others, taking care of others, giving self for others." This is what power is. Power isn't strength and might and the ability as Pilate so cynically says, "Don't you know, that I have the right to crucify you or not." That looks like power, but that's not power. Power is service. Power is care. Power is exercised by taking care of others. Power is washing feet. Now, here He finds himself near to death having received, and let's not sanitize this. The legions weren't kind. The legions weren't soft. They beat Him savagely. They beat Him nearly to death and then had Him carry His cross. Who's been to Jerusalem? Had Him carry His cross through that city and up the hill to be crucified. There He is hanging on this cross, mocked, jeered, taunted and then He dies and we pick up today's gospel. Because the next day, women go to the tomb and the tomb is empty. The body which had been laid there and the stone which had been rolled across the entrance, the stone was moved. The body wasn't there, the cloths were there, but no one, they didn't wrap around him. He wasn't there. He's gone. Something that happened is this, power doesn't win. Power never wins again. Power cannot win. It frequently looks like it wins. It frequently sounds like it wins, but it can harm and threaten, and disrupt, and corrupt, and frighten and intimidate and power can even kill and does but power can't win anymore because the tomb is empty. Because God raised Jesus from the dead. Because death has been defeated. Because death is no more. Because there's nothing more to fear and nothing more to hate. Power as we think of it, can't win anymore. This is a deep truth one that we are conditioned to deny and yet there it is. When God raised Jesus from the dead, power is no more in the form it took. Power can only be exercised in service of others.

Amen. Amen.