

POWER

Power. That's what I'd like us to think about for a few minutes today. Power – what is it? Who has it? I guess most of us would say it's something about being in control, being in charge, having an influence. If you're powerful you can move things or move people. Power is about making the kettle boil or the car move; it's also about changing hearts and attitudes and behaviour. We see power in institutions and systems (like the police or the Chinese economy that has had an effect across the world recently); we see power in individuals.

The Radio 4 Woman's Hour programme recently compiled its 2015 'Power List' of influential women. They included Nicola Sturgeon (first female leader of the SNP), Anna Wintour (the editor in chief of Vogue magazine), Angelina Jolie (actor, director, humanitarian speaker), newspaper editors, a speaker for Muslim women's rights and a trans -gender woman and a singer-songwriter. They are all there because they influence and lead others and shape attitudes.

Powerful people can be powerful through charisma, through the way they speak, through using force and violence, through their teaching. However it happens, power affects the way people think and act. We *all* have power – with our friends and family, in our social groups. We influence people for good or ill. Why do we want power? It gives us safety (if you have friends or followers or wealth or even just people to listen to you, it can increase the chance that life will work out comfortably).

But where does Jesus fit, in terms of power?

There were many powerful influences in Jesus' day, when he travelled through Caesarea Philippi and asked 'Who do people say I am?' That conversation was at a place where power systems crossed in different ways.

It was territory populated mainly by Gentiles and Jesus had just performed a miracle of feeding thousands of Gentile people. But the city nearby had been inherited from Herod the Great by his son. Cities all over the surrounding

land had been built as examples of power to rival even other family members and this was no exception. There was a background of hate and violence, power struggles everywhere you looked, intrigue and deception.

There were also religious power struggles. The Pharisees were the leaders of the Temple and worship, the respected teachers of God's Law as they believed it had been handed down to them and developed. They could decide who could worship and who couldn't. They worked out who was following the commands of God and who wasn't.

With this in the background, on the road Jesus asks 'Who do people say I am?' Well here comes the first strange statement about someone we think of as powerful: In in this mixed up place where everyone is vying for position and status, nobody really knows who he is! There's a mix of kind of religion and magic and some say he might be a prophet or Elijah or John the Baptist (both of whom are dead) but really nobody knows.

Does that not strike you as strange? If we think about Jesus as powerful, how come nobody knew who he was?

The problem with being surrounded by powerful people is that sometimes it's hard to think or speak differently. But Peter dares to say something different. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the most powerful one that people had been waiting for.

And here comes the second strange statement about Jesus and power: he warns them not to tell anyone about him. Why not?! Don't people want power to have a following? Doesn't he want everyone to know? You're a disciple and you're listening to this and the man you've seen perform feeding miracles and healing miracles and teach with great authority says you're not to tell.

But it gets even more confusing with the third strange statement. Jesus, the powerful preacher, teacher, healer, influencer, motivator, Jesus the Christ says that he is going to suffer, be killed and die.

No wonder Peter can't take it and wants to try to talk him out of this rubbish! No wonder he wants to tell him he'll protect him.

Is Jesus powerful or not? Jesus doesn't talk like many other powerful people. He doesn't talk about getting wealthy, being popular, being in charge, keeping rules; He doesn't seem to want to beat everyone else into first place.

What Jesus has talked about is repentance, a change of heart, healing, forgiveness, trust in God. So what is power when Jesus is in the picture?

It's this: *'deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me'*. That's not just about persevering in something we find hard. It's about denying my own view of life and taking up God's view. They're different. I want to do whatever will make me feel safe, loved and popular. God wants me to do the *right* things, risking everything else, but knowing that he will keep me safe and love me and that will be enough.

A cross was used by the Romans to kill people who were a threat to the state. Jesus died because he was considered a threat to the religious systems, maybe even the political systems of his day. I occasionally wonder if I'd be considered a threat to any great system. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be. Perhaps I should be. If I'm not, maybe I'm not standing out for Jesus as much as I ought.

Jesus does have power-more power than the others put together but his power was used for good and he was willing to lay it down if that's what God wanted. When everyone else wanted safety Jesus was saying *'Don't fear those who can kill the body but can't hurt the soul'* (Matt. 10:28) and when he died and Pilate talked about power, Jesus told him *'You would have no power unless it had been given you from above'* (John 19:11) He said about his own life *'I have power to lay down my life and take it up again. No one takes it from me'* (John 10:18).

So maybe denying myself and taking up a cross is about first laying down my own ideas of power and safety.

A completely different form of power comes when you're popular. Stephen Fry is well known as a comedian. He's been in many a TV series: Fry and Laurie, Jeeves, Blackadder; he hosts QI and is a presenter and panellist on a whole variety of Radio shows; he's done voiceovers and film parts and audio books.

He commands respect and he makes people laugh and listen. But twice in his life he's attempted suicide. He can talk about how there's no reason for it and know that it doesn't make sense to say he's a failure or a burden. But his apparently powerful, popular position makes no difference at all when he feels depressed.

There are others whose power has disappeared in different ways. Winston Churchill is famous for boosting the morale of the nation in leading through World War II but seeming to have no leadership qualities afterwards. Power taken away.

In contrast, Jesus did not seek safety, or popularity or take his own life or even have his power taken away, or fade in his influence. He chose to use his power for the good of others. He healed, he attracted people that others wouldn't bother with, he taught a way of life that was about becoming more human and not just about keeping rules; Jesus brought people closer to God and although it led to a huge following, it wasn't done to boost his own ego.

Power influences people- but we have the chance to lay down our own ideas of how to make it work for us and make it work for others instead. Our society needs a few more people to threaten the way it works!

We can deny ourselves and take up God's cross in our bit of the world

- every time we give up the need to be in control
- every time we give up wasting our resources
- every time we give up the need to be right rather than to forgive a hurt
- every time we give up the belief that intelligence and good academic results are what really matter
- every time we value technology or profits more than relationships
- every time we trust God to give what we need instead of just stockpiling and living selfishly

Power. Everyone has it to some extent. Was Jesus powerful? Most certainly. But his power was used for good alone, not for boosting his own position or safety. Jesus was prepared to be a threat to the powerful people of his day. Jesus laid down his life and yet it was the greatest sign of power the world could know. God's power is made perfect in weakness. How close are we to his example?