

17 The End of Power

In the end, the powers combined. All the power that Rome and Jerusalem could muster was brought together to kill the Messiah. However reluctantly they co-operated, the highest interests of the state as each saw it required that they work together, pressurising and manipulating one another until Jesus of Nazareth was destroyed, his credibility reduced to zero and eliminated from the political equation. They succeeded, and he was publicly executed as a criminal. His power was shown to be powerless and such followers as he had deserted him.

The way of God did not evade the humiliation and defeat of the cross. There, in terrible pain and the emptiness of failure, even God was not with him to save him. On the hill of the skull, where the will of his enemies carried the day and death at last had power over him, there was no power from God to rescue him. The last word has been said about the possibilities of power.

But life and energy, and possibility itself, were only beginning. In the morning, in the place where they had left his body, the tomb was found to be empty. There was only a messenger there, telling them that Jesus the Messiah was alive. The women, the very few who had not run away from the cross, now ran away from the tomb, terrified. There is no spectacular and triumphant end to Mark's Gospel¹, not even an appearance of Jesus, but only a message. Only three women know, and they were afraid. The evidence of victory in the end is simply the word of God, the message in quiet triumph given but shot thru with the glory of God:

He is not here. He is risen. He has gone before you into Galilee.

He goes before them still and they will see him in Galilee. They are to tell his frightened disciples that they are his disciples still, for Jesus is risen.

Jesus' death is the end of power as we know it. The resurrection of Jesus is not just God overcoming the powers opposed to him and restoring power to Jesus after all; it is God calling in question the very nature of power and exposing it as an empty charade. When the powers have done everything they can do and have triumphed in all the ways they can triumph (and their triumph is always, in the end, death) God simply goes on. The work of God and the kingdom of God rise and continue. God does what God has committed to do. Life is God's and God's to give, and God gives life to Jesus. The work of Jesus, which is to be with his disciples in Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of God, continues, and will not be extinguished.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the end of power as we know it, for it calls in question all our systems of power, even those we have built out of the gospel. Even Daniel's most godly vision of power – the triumphant power of the Son of Man coming at the end, the vindication of all good, to be served by all the nations, is overturned by Jesus:

“The Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve.”

¹ Mark's gospel ends at chapter 16, verse 8. The remaining verses were added by others who wanted to provide an “ending” to the gospel.

Jesus Messiah

At work in Capernaum or travelling around the communities of Galilee, Jesus is seen to be very much in charge of the situation. He is active and leads. He decides where he goes and there is evident authority in everything he does and says. When he responds to others, to their pleas or to their attacks, he does so as one who is well able to handle everything they bring to him or bring against him. He is in control. His disciples could not imagine that it would ever be otherwise.

There was, as we have seen, every possibility in this of a long and fruitful ministry, healing the sick and preaching the kingdom of God, and who knows whether even the scribes and the pharisees and Herod's officials might have learnt to leave him alone, once they realised he wasn't going to upset any larger plans.

But God was going somewhere, and the kingdom of God was moving, and Jesus was going to Jerusalem. Tho he approached the city with foreboding, he entered nonetheless in triumph, and, at first, seemed to be master of the argument even there. But there are warning signals. His victories in debate only antagonise the authorities further, and tho they are embarrassed there is no sense of their power being diminished. They cannot be cast out like the demons.

They have a power that cannot be dismissed, even by Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, wrestling with fear, he accepted the way of God that would leave power and control in the hands of his enemies, and when they caught and arrested him there, they took that control. From the beginning of his "passion", thru his trial, torture and death, Jesus was subjected to their power. In the last of his days, he is no longer the "master" and power is not on his side, as the crowd saw outside the praetorium. The ultimate act of the Messiah is to accept what power can do to him, and to die in pain because he has no part in power except as its victim. In the end, because he is the Messiah, he has no power, for power, in all the ways that humanity constructs and wields it, is alien to the Messiah. It is alien to God.

And yet, because the love and awe of power is not alien to the human heart but deeply embedded there, and from there firmly and solidly embodied in human constructs: in social relationships, laws and nations, the Messiah does not ignore it, but by God's will embraces it in all that it really is and in all the cruelty it can inflict. The role of the Messiah is after all defined by power, for it is power that puts him to death.

There is such a thing as the power of God, but it is so different from power as we exercise it, pursuing it, hoarding it, fearing it, that if there were another word to use, we should not talk about the "power" of God at all; for it is something else which brings to an end power as normally practised in all human systems. Within the limits of the English language, however, I shall be talking about the "power" of God and the "power" of the Messiah but we shall only rightly understand what that power is, if we have seen and heard and understood what happened on Golgotha.

In all our systems and models, power is a prize to be won or a possession to be guarded – we speak of winning and losing power – leaders need to get it and keep it in order to be effective. But the authority and power of the Messiah has no such shape. Jesus exercised it not to control anyone, not to control those who were dependent on him, to keep their support; nor to control those who opposed him, to prevent their disgracing and killing him. The life and energy in Jesus, that effective authority of

which they were so much in awe when he spoke at the synagogues of Galilee, and the life and energy that baffled and frightened the women at the empty tomb, was God's power to liberate, to heal and, in the end, to overcome death. It did not need to be maintained or replenished at the cost of others, for it came from the unlimited resources of God, and it did not need to force and control, any more than God needs to force and control, for God has unlimited resources from which to liberate and inspire.

The crucifixion is the ultimate challenge to our faith in Jesus the Messiah. Until we have met that challenge and survived it, we will not understand the reality of the power of God. This, I believe, is why Mark leaves us with the fact of the resurrection but none of its glory or consequences. He wants us to know the death of Jesus as God's final word on the operations of power. Unless we understand that, it is all too easy for us to see the crucifixion as God's penultimate judgement: God's merciful or idiosyncratic suspension of God's power, which will come back later to destroy, master and control, as victorious power always does in the end.

Jesus' crucifixion challenges our ideas of power and so our understanding of ourselves, in so far as we define ourselves by power: our personal power, the power of our incomes, the power of our systems, the power of our nations. Jesus the Messiah challenges us to let ourselves be redefined, without power to guarantee our security or to protect our identity – a more thoroughgoing repentance, a deeper change of heart and mind, than we might have imagined. Whatever the message sounded like at the beginning of his Galilean ministry, "Repent and believe the good news" is altogether more challenging when it is written under the cross.

If we as Christians fail to believe in Jesus the Messiah, it will most probably be from a sense of powerlessness, from a conviction that still holds of us, that power is as the world defines it and that Jesus does not exercise it – not yet – in the world. This failure, this conviction that power, after all, still rules, hides from us the good news that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he has already defined and established the rule of God. But Mark confronts us with the cross of Jesus' death and says to us, without apology, Here is the Messiah. He has renounced power as we know it and, rising from the dead to continue his work in Galilee, institutes as God's definitive rule a new order of life and healing, energy and authority, a rule without power as we know and use it, without the wish or the ability to enforce, control or impose. The resurrection of Jesus does indeed reveal the power of God, but it does not go back to undo the crucifixion. The "power" it reveals is utterly different from any power that would have prevented the death of Jesus.

The cross of Jesus the Messiah is the end of power and the beginning of the energy and authority of God, that totally other power of healing and life in which the rule of God is established. It is a moral and a spiritual power to attract and persuade, to win over and to empower, and to it corresponds the moral power of conviction, of faith and trust in God and in God's Messiah. It is the power that liberates and heals but never evolves into control over others. It will sooner accept to be swept aside, discredited and killed than override another's freedom and individuality – even if the other is a convinced enemy. And in its very dismissal and death, it is strong to survive and continue as the rule of God come among us.

Jesus Messiah

Our ability to believe in the kingdom of God depends on our ability to recognise this, that the power of the Messiah is the very opposite of power as we know and practise it, and that it is the power of God ruling in the world to change it and save it forever. To see this and to understand it involves a change not only in our behaviour, but in our very attitudes and perceptions, our eyes opened to a reality that will change and is changing the world.

Jesus does not hide his power on the cross, he exercises it – so different is it from the power we want to see. It is in fact a demonstration of love that is the Messiah’s fulfilment of the Law: to love, to value, to embrace God with your whole life and being, and to love, to value and embrace the other human person, whoever they are, as yourself. It is a power that will shape the world, and in that sense it is power. It’s not some consoling illusion, reconciling us to the hard “realities” of power, to the inevitability of arms and economics, to a logic of force and control that we cannot hope to change. It is the living power which tho it is killed and tho we are killed who believe in it, will triumph and will change the world, shaping the course of history still, when the nuclear arsenals, the aircraft carriers and the banks’ brave vaults are all rotting down into friendly rust, like the Soviet Black Sea fleet. It is the power of the poor in Nicaragua and the indigenous people of Guatemala which will outlive the economics, the armies and the terrorists of the United States to save even the world’s most “powerful” nation from its cancer. It is, in fact, the life, energy and authority of God which, tho it will not keep us from death, will save our enemies and our world from a victory that would destroy them all.

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It’s not that the message of Jesus sees no place for leadership and influence, for teaching and organisation, for work and commerce and politics, for all of those human interactions out of which we build our systems of power. They are to be, and they are a function of the kingdom; but they are to be without any of the deployment into power that we are always making of them. Jesus trained his disciples, and some of them he trained as leaders, but he warned them seriously against the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod: the privileges, advantages and structures of power that can be built out of leadership, whether moral or military, and could be built even by his chosen leaders. He was training them to be a different kind of leadership, with totally different tactics and a totally different goal, to be leaders without the power to control or enforce. Whether they would learn was still an open question.

Have you ever noticed that none of the people Jesus cured, the simple, broken people who came to him to be mended, were called to be his disciples? At least, none that we know of were called to follow him as the twelve did. I used to wonder about this, for I had been taught that Jesus chose the simplest, most unlikely of people, mere fishermen without any of the skills that make people powerful in the world, to do his work. I came to see, however, that Jesus did not chose people who were devoid of leadership qualifications. He chose, for instance, men who ran a fishing business. (The father of James and John employed other fishermen as workers.) He chose a tax-collector, and a “Zealot” (a known political activist).

He chose men, I believe, not because only men can do this job, but because in this area he was working within the possibilities of his own time and society. He was not

choosing the best or most faithful, for in the end, they all deserted him and those who were still with him were all women. What the gospels show us, if I may use the clumsy image of a social ladder, is Jesus choosing people who were one rung up the ladder, not at the “bottom” of the leadership tree but showing some possibility and opportunity of leading others. The crowds in Galilee needed leaders, and for all the power and kindness of Jesus’ healing and exorcism, something else was wanting: patterns of leadership that would help them to take shape as a people of God, renewing them to be Israel as Israel was ment to be when they were first brought out into the wilderness.

Jesus chose twelve of his disciples to become leaders of a kind that he would teach them to be. In other hands, they mite have been moulded as guerrilla commanders in a revolutionary war, or taught to climb the ladder of career and power in order to have more influence and do more good from higher up. In Jesus’ hands they were taught to reach back, being themselves just one step ahead, to help and teach the others, showing them how to live in the kingdom of God.

Not that they got the message. They were blinkered by all the usual pre-conceptions about power. Jesus had to warn them against the corruption of leadership into power, and they did not understand. You can just see them nodding sagely when he told them that leadership was a matter of service, and agreeing with him, “How very true.” And an hour later arguing about which of them offered the most important service with the greatest claim to ensuing privilege.

We should not imagine that Jesus was training his disciples just to be leaders in the “church” as a religious institution. Going around the synagogues, the communities of Galilee, they were teaching whole communities God’s ways of being community; they were proclaiming a new nation and a new way of being a nation under the rule of God. And the challenge of Jesus now is not just to patterns of leadership in the church, but to every pattern of leadership and structure of power that we set up in our societies: our professions, our governments, our armies, our corporations. In the Roman Catholic church we used to talk of “vocations” to follow Jesus, which always ment the priestly or religious life – and so we lost a vast opportunity to identify for all believers the whole range of human activity as the sphere in which Jesus calls his disciples to new ways of service and new models of leadership.

The twelve whom Jesus chose were to be leaders for a society renewed as the kingdom of God. They were very low-level leaders, as I said, only one rung “above” the people they mite lead, but they were the only kind of leaders Jesus chose, and from there their focus was to be, not on forging ahead in their leadership careers, but on turning back, reaching out to the people behind, and enabling them. It is a radically different concept of career and leadership.

There was no hierarchy, no ladder of professional or organisational competence to climb. From their little levels of competence, renewed by God, they were to empower others, to help, serve and enable. They were not to look upward to the next stage in their career, towards opportunities of greater power, wider influence (even for good) but outward and even backward to the needs of other people, to lay before them the service of God’s power. Leadership was not to be status and control, even used benevolently, but the service of enabling and liberating others.

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When we compare on the one hand Jesus' preparation of his disciples and on the other the way we ourselves embark upon or encourage a career, where we see the opportunities and how we exploit them, we will realise that there is a wide difference – an indication of the challenge it is to believe in Jesus and undergo that “repentance” to which he has called us. It's not just stopping doing a few things that are obviously bad – it's something vastly more positive. It's recognising a new way of living, and in particular, a new way of being together, of working, leading and serving, of making and following careers, of identifying ourselves as useful members of our society, of developing and sharing our skills.

The kingdom of God calls for a radical new approach to all these things; but that approach has been undertaken. Jesus has begun it with his disciples, and the opportunity is still before us to join him. If we believe, and recognise Jesus as the Messiah, well able to give us a pattern for life and society and well able to sustain us as we follow it, then this is the way we will go. I don't say that we will know at once how to carry it thru, or that we will necessarily get it all right. There will be trial and error, learning and unlearning, but in the power of Jesus the Messiah we will find that we are learning to live the kingdom of God.

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If we go that way we set out on our life's adventure. If we can be faithful to the call of Jesus the Messiah, to the ways of the kingdom of God, then new communities, a new society, new cities, new nations and a new world can be built. But they will be new, all of them, in the newness of the power that shapes them, God's kind of power. Where leaders no longer seek power but give power, where the skilled no longer strive to turn their skills into pay, but seek to serve, where every advantage is understood as an opportunity to advance others, then government will begin to be obedience to God and administration an action of love.

From true repentance, a true change of heart and mind and attitude, comes a new way of living and serving in which communities can be renewed and reconstructed, realising the kingdom of God. That is the only valid political aspiration for the followers of Jesus: to remake the world in the patterns of the kingdom of God, and over the centuries it has been done, again and again by those who believe in him.

But over the centuries it has also been spoilt, again and again, by the yeast of Herod and the Pharisees, by the corruption of disciples who do not remember the warning and think that power, which the Messiah exposed and rejected, has its place still in the world and the plans of God's people. The true power of God is revolutionary to the point of overthrowing and abandoning power, and every movement in every age that seeks to establish co-operation, consensus, respect for the weak, giving and sharing, in place of power and its accumulations, is on the road to the kingdom of God.

For God has proclaimed the end of power as we know it: power that consists of control over others, power to enforce our will or to impose a collective will against the will of minorities. Jesus is alive not with power to crush his enemies, but with the new power that fulfils the law of God, that engages and wins disciples and followers. It is the power not of control and compulsion, but of liberation and healing, the power

of attraction that comes from the love of God to put the law of God at the heart of all our actions and of all our community.

If we have really accepted the death of Jesus, we have accepted that it is the Messiah who dies, and with him, every hope of ever establishing peace and security on earth by pride defended and the power of money and arms. And we have accepted that it is the Messiah who dies, and therefore that his death, and the will of God expressed in it, is definitive for this world, for the coming of God's kingdom here, and God's will in our time and space. If we have not, if the pride of power, if money and weaponry are still, when it comes to the crunch, definitive for us, commanding our respect, then we do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. We, at least, must say that Pinchas Lapide is right and the early Christians wrong, that the Messiah is not yet come and the definitive kingdom of God not yet among us.

For those who believe in the kingdom of God, the following of Jesus can only ever be a continual revolution, turning away from the systems of power that were mixed with the yeast of Herod and the Pharisees, and trying again to initiate ways and relationships that realise the rule of God upon earth. When we look upon the hardness and the violence of societies, even of societies that grew from the hopes and efforts of believing Christians, we cannot be surprised that Jesus warned his disciples against the yeast of Herod, for we see the loaf that the yeast has raised and we see how little it resembles the kingdom of God. The logic of power expressed in our culture and our nations is in contradiction to the life, energy and authority of the Messiah, to the law of love to which the Messiah himself submits. And if our nations themselves stand outside that energy of God, opposed to it, fearing it or dismissing it, it's not because they stand outside the sphere of an other-worldly kingdom of God. Nor is it because the massive resources they control put them beyond the reach of ordinary individuals, who are only followers of Jesus. Nor is it that their power is demonic and so beyond human control, for the disciples of Jesus may still banish the Legions. It is because the followers of Jesus have not understood their responsibility and what it is that corrupts. It's because we have long since yielded to the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod, have taken our instructions and our pay-cheques and allowed a hostile world to dictate what happens to nine tenths of our time and our energies. It is because we have accepted in the ordinary walks of life the values and attitudes and methods that come from Herod and the Pharisees and not from Jesus the Messiah. Once these values are embedded in the life of Christians themselves, what is there left to prevent them from shaping and dominating the world?

But the kingdom is come and it is come as a flood of life and energy to which everything we call power is utterly inadequate. The kingdom is already and in all reality beginning among us, and its standard of energy and authority, its proclamation of the possible, overrides, for those who believe the good news, every counter-indication, however strongly entrenched, however fiercely or disdainfully maintained by the power-players of the world.

The rule of God is not a construct of power as we know it, yet it is the coming and fulfilment of God's power, the authority manifest in the risen Jesus, summoning his disciples back to Galilee and the work of God. It is the utter fulfilment of God's Law, to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves, now set before us as a prize within our reach, a way of servants where the servants, like the great Son of Man himself,

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enable and liberate, creating at their hands life and energy for others. It is the ending of fear in the feast and celebration of friendship, the glad welcome to God that is simple trust and the shouts of children. It is healing and mending, the forgiveness that sets us free and stands us on our feet. It is Jesus himself teaching us the ways of God that are already more real than the whole world's weight of power in the mould of Herod and of the Pharisees.

The question put to us by the gospel is whether, having seen and heard, we will believe. Or will we stop short at the empty tomb, dumbfounded by his resurrection and unable to comprehend what it means for the world? Will we believe in the Messiah, or when we announce that "Jesus is risen" will we leave it at that, as a mystery for wonder, religion and doctrine and no program at all for the world that is left behind by it? Will we celebrate it as a distant memory, or will we follow him into Galilee, where the work of the Messiah goes on?

When Mark ends his gospel, it's not with some triumphant constitution or program for the Messiah's victory. It's not with the setting up, even foreshadowed, of Israel or any other nation in security. It's not even with the vision of a future glorious church. He leaves us with a fact from which even the wise will wisely run in fear, a commanding fact around which all our lives can only accept to be challenged, demolished and rebuilt: the fact that Jesus the Messiah, risen from death, still leads his disciples in Galilee.

This has been a story that the timid are wise to avoid, for it tempts us to follow a Messiah who was crucified. It will tempt us to confront in the name of the kingdom of God the powers of the world, its commercial and political systems where we, like Jesus, will find we are not in control. It will tempt us into adventures where we no longer have even that comfortably separate religious sphere in which to be in control. If we stand too close to the risen Jesus and come to believe in his kingdom, the Messiah will lure us to a point where we lose everything, even our life, to gain it.

For the followers of Jesus, the cross of Roman torture now stands at the center of their lives and calls for a new understanding of Godly power, the power to be discovered in the coming of God's kingdom. That "power" of God will not lend itself to the power of the Pharisees or of Herod, it will not lend itself to the legions of Rome or Britain or America. But it will not stand aside while powerful nations carve out a world in their own image, shaped in their own interests, for it claims the world, this world, and the Messiah who was sent to claim it is risen and goes before us into Galilee. True power, the awesome reality of God's own energy and authority, is in Jesus still, and before that power, the whole world's game of power cracks and crumbles. The Messiah has died, and all our power has died with him. The Messiah is risen and the power of God rules in him. The Messiah goes before us and the world is his Galilee.