

Connecting to the Power / Kings 18: 22-24 and Luke 7: 1-10

'Power' is the connection point in our readings this morning. 'Power' and how it is used. Power and how it is used is certainly something we have to deal with in our lives daily. And I am not referring to the power that drives our cars, our buses, our washing machines, our dish washes, our computers, our television, electricity. We lose that power, are we know what it is to suffer. We misuse that power, and we know what it is to suffer.

The same thinking applies to 'the power theme' found in our readings this morning. Power, privilege and responsibility: abuse them and pay the price.

I looked up this Power in the Thesaurus on the computer: Power is the political control of a country; the authority to act or do something according to rule or law. And related to our readings: the ability, skill, or capacity to do something, physical force or strength, control and influence over other people and their actions; the ability to improve somebody's status, influence or effect; the ability to influence people's judgements or emotions.

So here in these readings: Elijah, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, Jesus of Nazareth and the Centurion - we find "power" at its best and its worst.

These few verses from 1 Kings remind us once more of the occasion when Elijah, the prophet of God, single-handedly took on Ahab, Jezebel and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and came out victorious. King Ahab was the king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel when the Nation of Israel had split into two: Israel and Judah. Ahab was a tough adversary for all who yearned for justice and peace and who wished to remain faithful to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

King Ahab and his wife Jezebel were wicked in the eyes of God. During Ahab's reign the very existence of God was under threat for Ahab and Jezebel worshipped Baal, a fertility deity. Jezebel even had many of the Prophets of God killed. For the prophet Elijah there was no place for other gods in the religion of the Israelites. There was one God and one God alone to be worshiped and Elijah

goes into battle against the evil pair showing great courage, strength of character and, above all, faithfulness and commitment to God as this event takes place.

Picture the event: There is the crowd. On one side: the forces of Baal: the King, Queen, the Court, 450 prophets of Baal; the sacrificial bulls lined up beside the altar for Baal and, on the other side, one lone man stands for God. Imagine the jeering!

And the challenge: the prophets of Baal and this lone man were to ask for fire from their deity. Whoever answered must be accepted as God. Their bull sacrificed, the Baal prophets whirled around the altar from morning til noon, and, in a final frenzy cut themselves with lances and swords. All in vain - for no divine answer came.

Then Elijah calls the people and he repairs the destroyed altar of the Lord. He built the twelves stones into an altar, dug a trench around it; put the wood on and cut his bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. Then to make it just a touch more difficult, the people filled four jars with water and poured them over the offering and the wood. This was done three times and the water flowed over and filled the trench. Elijah prayed "let it be known this day you are God of Israel and I am your servant" AND the fire fell and consumed the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust and licked up the water. All the people fell on their faces before the one true God.

God's power was very real this day. Elijah showed complete confidence that God would not abandon those realities for which God stands: justice, truth, compassion, faithfulness, trust. Elijah risked everything, and God responded to that risk; God affirmed the trust put in God by Elijah.

Let's pause for a moment and reflect on 'how would we go at risking everything for God?'

There is a strong contrast between Elijah and the Centurion and the Centurion and King Ahab. Ahab was the King, a powerful man but a man who used his power for oppression, injustice, corruption and turning from God. He was irresponsible with the privilege of status given to him.

Elijah appeared on the scene with no fanfare. Nothing is known of his origins or background. Elijah was not a powerful man, he was a very ordinary man who became a great prophet of God because of his faithfulness, trust in all circumstances in God. His power was God's power. In his powerlessness, he was made powerful and for him that privilege came with responsibility.

This man in our reading from Luke, however, is no ordinary man. He is a Roman Centurion and he is a man of power. His men don't just jump when he speaks - they ask 'how high?' Centurions were the backbone of the Roman Army. The Centurion had to be what is described as 'a man among men' or he would never have held the post he had. And what we read about him in this encounter with Jesus - or non-encounter for they did not meet - reveals a man not given to corruption, abuse of power or a man who sees himself above others. For him, his power was a privilege that came with responsibility. The opposite, in fact, to King Ahab. Certainly it seems he is a religious man and as a Roman he had an extremely unusual attitude to the Jews. If the Jews despised the Gentiles - all non-Jews; then the Gentiles returned the same strong feeling. This was not the case here and it would seem that this Roman Soldier of high standing was perhaps attracted to the Jewish faith and found solace and meaning in its teachings.

It seems his servant was a death's door. This is a servant/a slave he values. Again something worthy about the man for this attitude is unusual. In Roman law a slave was defined as a living tool; he had no rights; a master could ill-treat a slave and even kill me if he chose. And when ill - near to death - could just throw him out onto the street.

That would surely have been Ahab's way but it is not the way of the Centurion who does what he does best; what he is trained to do - he delegates: he sends a delegation of Jewish elders to speak to Jesus. Makes sense for him to do this -- he is man who commands the troops and would have little time to spare.

As we have seen, these Jews elders have an apparent relationship with this Centurion after all he built their synagogue and may himself worship in the porch of the Gentiles. From Luke's report, we are led to think that these men, along with the Centurion, know

about Jesus and do not doubt that Jesus can heal the servant. They plead with Jesus to come and heal the servant because the Centurion is a good man, a highly respected man who shows it through his actions for the nation and the people.

Jesus goes with them but as they come within distance of the house, the Centurion sends another delegation, this time his friends to Jesus and in this conversation we learn a lot more about the Centurion. We learn why he sent the elders and later his friends rather than going himself. The message the friends bring is to tell Jesus that he is not worthy to have Jesus come into his house. We discover here that this Centurion, this man of power, did not consider himself worthy to even come and talk to Jesus - hence the two delegations. A further message is relayed: Say the word and my servant will be healed.

For a man of great power, what interesting behaviour he is displaying. The friends relate more of the message: "I am a man under authority; a man of power. I say do this and it is done. Go there and they go." Here is a man who understands power and authority and he recognises the true power and authority in Jesus. He recognises that in the presence of Jesus, his power, his authority, is but a shadow; lacking in substance, reality. How great is this man's belief in Jesus.

Jesus is amazed at the thinking, the understanding of the Centurion. For this acknowledgement of where true power, authority lies, Jesus praises the man's faith. So turning to the crowd following him, Jesus remarks on the great faith of this man saying 'I have not seen anything like it.' After the men delivered the message, they returned home and found the servant healed.

Here in this second reading: we find the Centurion let go of his power to be powerless and in that show of faith God acted. He too showed courage, faithfulness, responsibility, and strength of character. He risked everything and this risk was honoured, affirmed through the healing of the servant.

True power lies in the hands of God alone.

How different is this Centurion, a man of power to King Ahab, a man of power. Reminds me of that phrase especially quoted in political circles: Absolute power corrupts! For Ahab yes, the Centurion, no. And we see it ourselves: 'power - corruption' rather than 'power - privilege - responsibility' being lived out in politics, the media and the corporate world. We see, even experience it in our daily lives, how even a little power can go to the head of many and cause them to be bullies in the workplace, in marriages, school and in other situations.

I suspect most here would claim we are powerless and certainly yes, there are those times in our daily lives when we certainly do feel powerless. Government, Government policy, Government departments, rules, even the person in the department we are dealing with certainly all contribute to our feeling powerless and we want to storm the barricades and take power into our own hands. And yes, there are certainly situations in life, in the workplace, in relationships, even church that make us feel powerless. And again we want to take a stand and claim our power.

Power in itself is neutral. It is what is done with power that is the issue. And that comes in all shapes and sizes, actions and behaviour; even when we don't realise that is what we are doing.

One time when I was studying for my Bachelor of Theology, I received an essay back with only a credit. I was disappointed, as I had been receiving Distinctions. A few of us were carrying on about only getting credits, myself in particular when a good friend Lynne burst into tears and told us all to be quiet. We asked her what was her problem. She said to us: 'you received credits and here you are making a huge fuss'. At least you passed. She showed us her essay - a great red F. I know she had put a lot of work into it yet; there was an F, which meant she failed the whole year's course. You can say, well you didn't know, and that is true, however, power can be insidious

Consequently, often we don't even recognise power games in our daily lives. Oh! we know when we are on the receiving end but what about the other way around. We may not realise when we are displaying 'power' over another so we need to be alert. Privilege has responsibility.

We can exert power in a negative way - the king Ahab way, by even little things ... a lift of an eyebrow, a rolling of the eyes or simply scoring points off one another when it comes to exam results. I know this is what I was doing with my friends until it all went wrong and a good friend failed and that failure changed her last year of study.

We need to be aware constantly of how we are living together with each other. We can choose to bring out, to nurture, the best in one another or choose to walk all over their dreams, their life, their hopes because we simply choose not to care. We can influence another in choosing not to care, take an interest - being concerned more for ourselves and what is happening to us. We can be life denying or life affirming by our attitudes, our behaviour, our nurturing. Our actions all add up to power...for the good, for the bad.

Powerful Little acts can leave powerful big marks. Think about it.
Amen

