

Trinity XVII – 25th Sunday in OT – Year B

“Everybody wants to rule the world” by Tears for Fears is an internationally successful song, realised in 1985 that topped the charts in multiple countries! When we read human history we can easily see the truth of this claim – “Everybody wants to rule the world”, even the current international political scene proves that major powers are in the game of reaching for more power. The Human heart craves for more power, greater wealth and fame, with its own designs as the song goes, and struggles to make the most of freedom and of pleasure, and of the resources available to achieve this.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher was on to something very true when he argued that **Will to Power** is the main driving force in humans. We could all identify up to some degree with the concept of self-determination and attempting to self-actualize. That’s what we have been encouraged to do when we are educated, to do well in life and be successful in whatever we decide to do with our lives, to climb up the ladder. The apostles of Jesus were not any different in this common human desire. We hear in our Gospel today

that they have been arguing about which of them was the greatest! They are all striving to be the best apostle of Jesus, they are as ambitious as the rest of humanity, and feel envious and jealous at the success of others. They too, just want to **Rule the World on either side of Jesus, sitting on his left and on his right.**

This Will to Power or the Desire to rule the World comes from man's fallen sinful human nature, from our broken relationship with God. Without God in his life man is powerless and feels powerless, helpless and alone, he worries about his future, feels insecure and plots as much as he can to secure his survival in an endless pursuit of wealth and power.

So what is the solution for this fallen desire of ours? The answer of course is in the Life of Jesus. This is what Jesus changed with his life. *He did not desire to Rule the World, but to save the World; he did not have a Will to Power but a Will to Serve!* By desiring the opposite of what the fallen man does Jesus' will to serve became the greatest of power the world has seen, he became the true ruler of the world with the power that comes from God the Father. This is what he attempts to communicate to us through the Gospel today.

The whole focus of this Gospel lies on Jesus' attempt to educate his disciples about his coming fate in Jerusalem. They now know that he is the Messiah but still cling to the conventional understanding of the role: **a ruler of David's line who would triumphantly restore the fortunes of Israel.** They find it very difficult to set that understanding together with Jesus' insistence, heard again in today's Gospel, that he is to be betrayed and put to death. They do not fully understand what he is saying and they are afraid to ask him.

Their fear is not lack of confidence to question Jesus but fear of what he say to them. They half know what he is saying and, in an understandably human way, shrink from full knowledge of the unpalatable truth. They prefer to cling to the hopes and exciting prospect for themselves that being close associates of the Messiah as conventionally understood would entail, in other words they have a Will to Power and a Desire to Rule the World!

This, presumably, has been the subject of their discussion on the road. They have been arguing about which of them would have the top roles and positions of honour in the coming messianic kingdom.

Nothing in fact could be more at odds with what Jesus has been attempting to communicate than such disputes about greatness. When, doubtless with some awareness, he questions them about the subject of their argument on the road, they guiltily remain silent; they know – or at least half-know – how inappropriate such talk is.

So Jesus decides to dramatize the instruction. Insisting that the one who would be first must be last and servant of all, he takes a child from the house and sets it in front of them all. Then putting his arms around the child, he makes an extraordinary statement of self-identification: **‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’.**

To appreciate the full force of Jesus’ action, we have to put aside the idealisation of childhood that arose in the 19th century. In the ancient world children were precious, no doubt, to their parents, but had no social status or value whatsoever; until adulthood they were nobodies. For someone outside the family to ‘welcome’ a child would be to turn prevailing values and social norms upside down; it would require putting aside all one’s ideas of self-importance and adult status,

and simply meeting the child as an equal, as ‘child’ to child. That, says Jesus, is what the disciples must practice – because in so doing they will be welcoming him and the Father who stands behind his entire life and mission, which is not one of dominance and being served but one of service, destined to culminate in the supreme ‘service’ of the cross.

Not only, then, does Jesus’ gesture challenge the disciples’ notion of messiahship. It goes to the heart of their – and our – understanding of God. Is God to be thought of as an extra-terrestrial supreme Ruler to whom nothing but fear and service is due? Or is the God revealed by Jesus a God whose primary gesture towards human beings is that of One who serves, One who comes among us in the guise of a child? **Jesus’ gesture of hugging the child in front of all shows more powerfully than any words could express the preciousness of each and every human life, no matter how small, how insignificant, in the sight of God. We are all – in our ‘littleness’ rather than our achievement – hugged by Jesus in this moment.**

The challenge to worldly values, power, and honour and the desire to rule the world, that the disciples found so difficult confronts the Church in every age. After the early centuries of persecution the

leaders of the Church emerged at the time of Constantine to take on many of the trappings and roles of Roman officials. A good ecclesiastical career was desired by many a men in the past for centuries. Thankfully we are now witnessing the end of that Church, where you become a cleric to receive worldly honour and power.

The Epistle Reading from James appropriately enough approaches the same issue of power and ambition in the uncompromising language, typical of this letter, when it says, brethren, where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. How appropriate the words of James to our international political climate? **“What causes wars, and what causes fighting among us?.... You desire and do not have; so you kill!”**

So, as we continue to see the human drama of the nations at war due to the ‘Desire to rule the World’ and the ‘Will to power’ let us also be aware of the battle within our hearts; while we give thanks to God for the good withing us, let us ask the Lord to purify our desire for worldly honours and powers with his Mercy, and help each of us to follow the path of our Lord Jesus Christ in his Saving Work of the World. Amen.