

SERMON PREACHED AT KING'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE

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The authority to set free

The gist of today's readings is the Christian approach to power and authority. It is about how we perceive and react to power and authority. We hear of Paul's moral approach to authority and of Jesus's startling power to set demons free; perhaps indicating to us our power as Christians to free ourselves and others from oppressive power and authority.

I used to work in the post-war Balkans for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, partly as a donor to the broken civil society focused on reconciliation and later for the UN and EU establishing a new country. This was very difficult work: the recent wars had been characterised by atrocious and inhuman war crimes. But even war criminals are the children of God and they too are loved by God. It can be difficult to accept and maybe sounds terribly pious. It is not, but it is hard and difficult work.

One story cannot escape me. A young man was made a prison camp manager at the beginning of the Bosnian war. He committed some extremely vicious crimes. His victims were his former friends, teachers and people from the local area. Thanks to the good work of NATO, British troops and the United Nations, this young man was caught. He was sent for trial at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague and served his sentence.

Once he had been released, he soon realised that no one wanted him. No one wanted to touch him. No one wanted to employ him and he certainly could not, at this point, return to Bosnia again. He was also plagued by guilt at what he had done. Filled with demons.

He realised that the only ones who could release his demons, would be those he'd bereaved and those he'd so thoroughly and viciously

done everything possible to destroy. So he reached out, with the help of some intermediaries.

He tried to set up meetings with the people he had harmed in Bosnia. Some of them accepted that he needed to see them. He was not asking for forgiveness, but asking for help to set his demons free. One of his victims died of a heart attack on the way to see his former oppressor. A bereaved mother said that she had no desire to see his demons leave him.

Should we help someone who has caused so much harm to others to be free of his demons? Help them to be able to contribute in a positive way to society?

Another dilemma I met was while I was an EU Diplomat, working on reforming Ukraine into a well-functioning accountable European democracy. We were dealing with a corrupt regime, in the belief that we had to work with those whom the people had elected. And we could always slowly improve them. The Russian regime seemed to think the same, although having a rather different agenda than we had as the EU. Regimes started competing with one another. Few were bothered about what the people thought, beyond the treaties and laws we managed to prepare and sign, and have put through the Rada, the Ukrainian House of Commons.

But the people had had enough. The people were not of the opinion that their authorities were working upon a Pauline commission from God, when they were accepting bribes. People were not happy that in order to be able to study law at the Criminal Faculty, to be able to become a prosecutor, bribes over the years up to 50 000 Pounds would be expected. The people did not like that their President could be bought for money, to block laws, transforming Ukrainian governance into a more conscientious government. The people of Ukraine decided that they had had enough. They took authority into their own hands. They had the authority and ability to meet and hold their leaders accountable.

Let us turn to what Paul says again:

Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

Therefore, one must be subject, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience.

At the time there was an absence of conscience within the Ukrainian leadership and self-interest came first. So, the people went out onto the streets, even on days when the temperature was down to -20 degrees. Their friends and common believers in the cause were shot and killed. But they wanted to be set free and together they claimed the authority to be so.

It would be overstating the case to say that everything is done, dusted and now fine in Ukraine. Indeed, we might even ask whether it was all worth it. Just as when Jesus set the demoniacs free and it cost the livelihoods of the gentile farmers, there is a cost associated with a lack of conscience. Once evil has been present, it will leave a scar behind. In Ukraine, not only were people killed at the Maidan, but also Crimea, a place with an important role in British history, was lost to Russia. A large part of Eastern Ukraine, Donbas, is in a merciless continuous war where casualties happen every week. You still have to pay bribes for the right to enter education, but the cost is less than before. Ukraine now has an operational agreement with Europol to chase illegal funds, although that is not fully functioning yet.

Who has the authority to continue such a regime? What should be the Christian understanding of power and moral authority? What should be the Christian response to political power exercised oppressively? Do Christians have a duty to resist, react or respond when political power is exercised immorally?

I believe what we have heard from Paul today, is that there is a moral authority to power, and for it to be conscientiously exercised.

And to be Christ-like means being brave. Full of Christ-like authority which compels us to set demons free where we can. To do what we can to help each other in terms of authority we must begin with moral authority before it becomes a question of power. That means being able to listen, respect, have compassion and be ready to react when we can and when we ought to.

This also counts for our everyday lives, where it is not about political power. In university terms it might be a supervisor's power and the fear of his or her disrespect for an honest attempt at an essay; in family terms, it might be the fear of telling a parent that you have fallen for the temptation of drugs and need help. For many in the world it might be the fear of feeling disempowered in the face of an oppressive government or a government's oppressive policies towards the poor. Christ in our everyday lives frees us, amongst other things, from the fear of asking, or giving, forgiveness for the cruellest act you could ever have imagined done to anyone.

The natural subsequent question would be, whether reconciliation really works? It is undoubtedly difficult, but must be a subject for another sermon.

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