

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Twenty Second Sunday After Pentecost (B)
Sunday, October 21, 2018

Job 38:1-7 (34-41) | Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b
Hebrews 5:1-10 | Mark 10:35-45

Some young children were asked what they knew about Angels.

"I only know the names of two angels. Hark and Harold,"

Gregory, age 5

"My guardian angel helps me with math, but he's not much good for science."

Henry, age 8

"It's not easy to become an angel! First, you die. Then you go to heaven, and then there's still the flight training to go through. And then, worst of all, you got to agree to wear those angel clothes!"

Matthew, age 9

"Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic Orders? And even if one were to suddenly take me to its heart, I would vanish into its stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us."

In this the first his Duino Elegies, the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, imagines what it would be like to meet an angel. In his mind, this angelic being would be so much more real, more powerful, more alive, more beautiful than we, that we could not stand before it. Being so much less substantial, so much weaker, so frail in comparison, he suggests we might simply disappear and be undone in its presence.

We see this theme repeated in the Scriptures many times. Moses has to hide in the cleft in the rock to survive the raw presence of God. Even then, he can only look on the back of God's glory, and then his face shines with unnatural light for weeks afterwards. Paul is struck blind by his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Elijah too hides in a cave and covers his head when he hears the still small voice of the living God.

God's power and being is quite simply more than we can bear in our present form.

I had a conversation about a year ago with the recently retired Executive Director of the Georgetown Ministry Centre, Gunther Stern, about the homeless people he had been serving for over 20 years. He outlined the difficulty of the fact that many of the homeless suffer from mental illness and addiction and that that meant that their ability to choose wisely or rationally was, in many cases, greatly reduced. The law, and everyone who cares about them, of course want to treat them with respect, and to respect their choices, even if that choice means to live on the street when they may not have to. The difficulty lies in how do you care for someone who, through addiction and mental illness, is not really free to make a real choice? Do you use force to make the choice for them, to get them on the right medication and, hopefully, restore them to a state of mind where they can make a reasonable choice, or not? Gunther had come to believe that that is what is necessary for some.

The question of the use of power in the interests of those we care for and love is not unfamiliar to us. When our children are young, the choice is pretty clear. We make choices for our children, if necessary against their will, because they are not competent to know what is best for them.

I remember my daughter's first day at school at the age of four. It was a big day. Off she went and we all prayed she would be all right. When she came home, I remember asking her how it went. "Well Dad," she said, "it was OK, but I don't think I'll go back." We made her go back, of course, because we believed education was essential for her even if she didn't at the time!

When children are older though, or when we are dealing with our dear adult friends and loved ones, the choice is harder. How much is it right for us to intervene, to cajole, to pressure, or – in the more extreme situations – to involve other authorities or agencies to get what we think needs to happen to happen? Our love and concern demands we act, but it also makes us loath to take away our loved one's freedom to choose. After all the most precious aspect of our lives is our freedom to choose our own way. We may not all have the same amount of choice, but however limited our choices may be, what choice we do have is very precious to us.

The same might be said on the grander stage of society. What do we do if people around us believe what we don't believe, or want to do something we think is wrong? Do we trust a democratic process, or do we take away people's right to choose, because we think we are right, and know what is best for them? So far, our society has preferred the former.

In any case, love and power lie right at the heart of so much that is difficult in our lives.

Two things are unavoidable in the scriptures. That God is power, and that God is love.

In today's Gospel we see an example of how God exercises his power and love in the world, and how we are called to exercise whatever power we have.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the young and enthusiastic disciples that Jesus nicknamed "the Sons of Thunder" are caught trying to carve out a special place for themselves in Christ's Kingdom when it comes. The anger of the other disciples makes Jesus explain something about how God's power and love work. Unlike the way of power and authority in the world, Jesus explains that Christian leadership is expressed in service and sacrifice.

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Here is a precursor of Maundy Thursday when Jesus makes the point even more dramatically by washing his disciples' feet.

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am." Jesus says, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."

I remember a family in church when I was growing up. The father was the Managing Director of a business in the city. He was no walk over, and had made some tough decisions to make the business profitable. However, when the Head Office put pressure on him to make redundancies to make what was profitable more so, he disagreed. After a great deal of reflection he decided that he could not do

what he did not think was necessary or fair and, much to his superiors' surprise, in late middle age, he resigned. He knew, of course, that the business was principally there to make money, and couldn't exist if it didn't, but he also believed that the company had a responsibility to the people who had worked hard to make it a success. I remember as a boy being hugely impressed by this. Not that I knew anything about economics at the time, but I sensed that this man believed that his position carried with it a real and human responsibility for those that worked for him. Since then, I have seen this in many good Commanders in the Army also. The little rituals of that organization, like officers eating last after the soldiers are fed in the field, or the senior ranks waiting on tables in the soldiers' cook house at Christmas, or the Commanding Officer and seniors going round to the soldiers' barrack rooms with tea and rum at 5.30 am in the morning on their Regimental Days – all these actions remind people of the motto of the Officer Academy I later served in, which was "Serve to Lead".

Power and love. God exercises power in the world by loving intervention exercised under enormous restraint. Unlike Rilke's awe in the face of how he imagines angels' vast power and beauty, God's power does not "d disdain to destroy us." He chooses not to destroy, because he loves.

This is where the symbolic figure of Melchizedek in this morning's Epistle finds its fullest meaning – the King who is a priest and who exercises power in service, blessing, and self-sacrifice.

Of course, where someone has no freedom or choice through illness, or addiction, or some other great handicap of mind or life, then there is perhaps no freedom to take away. In that kind of situation, Jesus does not hesitate to take control. The Demoniac, for instance, who is tortured by many demons and who can do nothing to help himself. When Jesus meets him, he does not even speak to the man until he has first driven the demons out of him by force, and restores to him his humanity and freedom. Only then does he release him and tell him to go home. Gunther Stern's feelings about some of our mentally ill and homeless has a scriptural precedent in this, I think, however fraught with difficulty such decisions inevitably must be.

So when we think of our children as they grow up, as we think of those friends who seem to us to be choosing disaster, and perhaps as we think of those we disagree with in understanding, belief, or politics, this morning's readings give us a model to use and apply.

God calls us all to power and to love. We cannot avoid exercising power. We have to do so just to get out of bed in the morning, but we have a choice as to how we embrace those two divine qualities in our lives. Love demands that we use our power to act, but it also demands that we serve and refrain from coercion and treating people as simply a means to our own ends.

It is this that, that despite our frailties and sinfulness, makes us a little higher than the Angels, for all their pure and powerful and beautiful spirits. They are, if they are anything, and I think they are something, simply expressions of God's power and will. We, on the other hand, have the opportunity to choose to imitate Christ and to be here, not to be served, but to serve – to be prepared to pour out our lives and energies in the cause of Christ, and for those he came to save.