

Reflection 1 August

Speaking truth to power – power measuring

May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Today is Swiss national day ! I hope you all know that the Swiss confederation found its origins in 1291, when the cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden united to maintain peace upon the death of Emperor Rudolf I of Habsburg...

As a foreigner who is lucky enough to live in this beautiful country, I have to confess that I find it a bewildering mix of authority and regulations on the one hand, and a ridiculously consensual system on the other, characterized by its local governments and regular referenda on unlikely matters ...

So when I saw the Old Testament reading from the second book of Samuel, I thought I should talk to you about “power” – specifically about each of us and power.

King David was the ultimate power of the day. And like our powerful leaders, the story of Uriah the Hittite shows that David was not perfect – indeed he was a long way from perfect. A dangerous combination, lust and unbridled power ...

Our reading tells of the prophet Nathan being sent by the Lord to make David understand that his behaviour was not unnoticed by the Lord, and is certainly not a little slip that the Lord was going to ignore ... “But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.”

Nathan brings David to understanding by telling him the story of a poor man whose only sheep is stolen by a rich man. David reacts against the inequity of the rich man before realizing the parallel with what he did to Uriah the Hittite ... “Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

A shining example of Nathan speaking truth to power. But what exactly does speaking truth to power mean?

Fortunately for us, there is an entry on exactly this topic in Wikipedia, that fount of all truth and knowledge. It says:

“Speaking truth to power is a non-violent political tactic, employed by dissidents against the received wisdom or propaganda of governments they regard as oppressive, authoritarian or an ideocracy. Blah blah, blah ... Practitioners who have campaigned for a more just and truthful world have included Apollonius of Tyana, Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and Elie Wiesel.”

Wikipedia goes on: “Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov are among those who suffered for speaking out against the USSR. In 1936, Japanese finance minister Takahashi Korekiyo was assassinated after suggesting that Japan could not afford its planned military

buildup. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany, and Martin Luther King Jr. in the US, were people who lost their lives for speaking truth to power.”

Forgive me – this truth to power thing sounds like another of these wonderful, high-flying notions ... that have nothing to do with me. Nothing to do with my daily life ...

I mean, the Lord doesn't send me to speak to adulterous kings (at least He hasn't recently), I'm not the finance minister of Japan on the eve of a world war, I don't live in a fascist state (no matter what I think of Swiss rules) ...

If we get stuck in the narrow idea of “speaking truth to power” illustrated above, it might indeed have little to do with us. But I think that Wikipedia is focused on just one narrow example of a much broader point ...

This is actually a continuation of what Kristin was talking to us about last Sunday. She talked about the resistance qualities of faith, in the sense that our faith enabled us to resist the pressures of the world. She used the expression “remaining rooted and grounded in Christ's love”.

And she talked about taking the knee, resisting the pressures of the world, speaking truth to power, and relying on the armour that the Lord gives us to do that.

The idea I'm wanting to share builds on the “rooting and grounding” that Kristin talked about last week, but focusses a bit more on one of the ways in which the “rooting and grounding” works – that is by offering us a standard, a yardstick or a weight against which we can measure our daily life, and the powers at play in our lives. Just as this tape measure offers a way to measure furniture, or pieces of wood – only it measures centimeters, not power.

Let me try to illustrate the need for such a power measuring device with two stories I heard recently.

Just last week my friend Bob told me about a strange professional experience he had had recently. Bob works in New York had been asked to come to meet one of the richest women in the US to talk to her about “family governance”. In my world, this refers to complicated agreements between family members about managing family wealth, voting the shares of family businesses, making strategic decisions ... it is a fraught business, and in my experience the advisors who practice it are about as useful as a self-help book when it comes to dealing with the terrible twos, or coping with adolescent fits of pique, or resolving marital tensions ...

So my friend Bob was a bit worried. He wasn't sure that he'd have much to tell this woman who, given her vast wealth, must be surrounded by all the lawyers and advisors she could need... and as he sat in the gilded meeting room of the law firm where he had been asked to meet her, he wondered if he should have accepted the meeting at all.

When the door opened, he was surprised that the woman was not accompanied by a phalanx of advisors and lackeys. He was also surprised by what she told him ... she had been recently widowed. Her husband, a fantastically successful entrepreneur, had always run the business. Out of a sense of duty to their father, she and her two adult children now wanted to be involved in the family business, but none of them really knew what to do. The woman said that they wanted to learn how to manage the vast wealth that had just been dumped on them just at the moment she had lost her life partner and husband, just at the moment the children had lost their father.

Bob realized that she didn't need advice, she needed someone to help.

So what does "speaking truth to power" mean in this context? Clearly Bob was expecting to meet a domineering, powerful, extremely wealthy person ... and he met a widow who needed help. The power he had imagined evaporated – perhaps it had never existed. The standard offered by the world to measure the situation didn't work. Money did not equal power. He needed a different "power-measuring device".

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Another friend was telling me about a conversation with her teenage daughter. I'll call her Jane. Jane was talking to her daughter ... about her eyebrows ...

Apparently, Jane's daughter felt that plucking off / shaving her eyebrows was important because it improved her self-esteem. More specifically, having shaved eyebrows allowed her to apply make-up to better shape her eyebrows, and thereby feel better about her looks.

Jane told me that she felt a bit disarmed by this – how should she respond? Because she believed that what her daughter was describing as preserving her self-esteem was actually just conforming to peer pressure, the pressure to conform to the norms of Instagram, Tik-tok and the like. And like any addiction, the constant effort to conform and meet the illusion of beauty on social media provides at best fleeting satisfaction. And the certainty of having to struggle to meet the next social standard. How could Jane get this across to her daughter? How could she show her daughter a power measuring device – one which might show the social media standards for just what they are – a form of power, covert and addictive. Power to which truth must be spoken.

I think the stories of Nathan, Bob and Jane have something in common: They were all dealing with power. And the stories of Bob and Jane are about measuring that power.

The power Nathan was dealing with was King David – a universally recognized super-power.

Bob was dealing with an impression of power – his impression that this incredibly rich woman would somehow be a difficult person, a threat, a challenge. Our society puts a lot of importance on wealth – wealthy people are respected, wealthy people are important. Bob nearly didn't go through with the meeting. But society's power measuring didn't work. The woman he was to meet turned out to be human – indeed a person in need of help, not

difficult nor threatening. Not nearly so lofty as Bob had imagined. He needed a different power measuring device.

Jane's daughter doesn't seem to even be aware that she is dealing with power – the power of peer pressure, the power of the pressure of conform. It seems to be holding her tightly in its thrall ... and only time can release its grip. She needs a different power measuring device.

I think all three examples tell us about our need to be rooted and grounded in something which is not human, not society's expectation, not even our own instincts. We need a trustworthy yardstick. An anchor. I believe that our lives are lived in a sea of influences and currents, and that it is terrifyingly easy to get lost.

I am convinced that our connection to God is critical to recognizing and understanding the powers of the world. I believe that our connection to God is critical to not getting washed away – washed away by the powers of this world, washed away by our own ideas, washed away by the demands of society.

This is what Kristin was talking to us about last Sunday. She talked about the resistance qualities of faith, in the sense that our faith enabled us to resist the pressures of the world. We can resist when we remain “rooted and grounded in Christ's love”.

Kristin talked about Paul's paradoxical freedom, the freedom that he found in Christ's love, despite the fact that he was in prison. His rooting and grounding in Christ's love allowed him to measure his situation with a different standard, with a different power measuring device.

Kristin talked about strength of the Christian community, the church family, which as some of you will know is a theme to which I keep returning.

I love the idea that being “rooted and grounded” allows me to resist, stops me getting lost. Something that is rooted does not get lost. A tree that is firmly rooted may be buffeted by a storm, but it isn't blown around like a piece of paper.

The pier which has its foundations in the seabed will have waves crash over it in bad weather, but its grounding means that it doesn't get washed away like something left on the beach will do.

Speaking truth to power requires that we be rooted and grounded in the love of God's love, not simply for the defensive qualities of this rooting and grounding, but first and foremost because it gives us a standard by which to understand the world, against which to measure what we experience. The rooting and grounding is a power measuring device.

I wanted to leave you with a little gift, I found these at Jumbo! – but I have been defeated by Zoom ...

I wanted to give you each one of these little folding tape measures – in guise of a “power measuring device”.



Because I'd like you to go away today with the question – what is it that you use to measure all that happens around you? How do you measure the powers that you come across in your life? And how do you speak the truth of Christ's love to them?

Louise has chosen a very appropriate song which we will sing next, and which answers my question ...

Amen

“In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song, this cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm ...”