

Sermon for Trinity 3

Mother Emma

Readings: Jeremiah 10:1-6, Romans 13:1-10

I was surprised and a little amused to remember when I looked at our lesson from the Epistle to the Romans in the Authorised Version, that this is where the expression, the “powers that be” comes from. It is a phrase often used nowadays to allude to instructions which come down from unspecified or even slightly resented sources: we may not be clear who they are or wish to name them, but we cannot argue with the “powers that be”!

“Higher powers”, also used in this reading, have come today to mean God himself or some spiritual or moral power which falls outside the material world we experience; those familiar with 12-step recovery programmes such as AA will be aware that they use the expression “higher power” to suggest something which is greater than human power and can give strength to overcome. In fact, Paul’s Greek in this passage means something much more specific than either of these – it could be more literally translated as “the governing authorities” and the first line is very clear that “those authorities which exist have been instituted by God.”

This is potentially a much more difficult concept to wrestle with than more nebulous powers, as we look critically at governing authorities across the world and throughout the centuries. For the ancient world, Creation had brought order out of chaos and darkness. After the Fall, as humankind spiralled back into a potentially chaotic and self-serving situation, the existence of “authorities” appointed by God, together with the rule of law and rules governing society like the Ten Commandments, enabled peaceful, functioning human societies to exist – a framework upheld and reinforced throughout Scripture.

St Paul himself had good reason to respect the legal framework of the governing **Roman** authorities which on several occasions rescued him from being lynched by mobs, murdered by ambushes or violently persecuted in the synagogues.

Broadly speaking, it can be said that right up to the time of the Reformation, the existence of righteous governing authorities, together with social laws and mores were seen as a good thing, even though there were undoubtedly occasions on which the claim to be appointed by God was exploited by rulers intent on maintaining or expanding their own power.

I don’t know whether the somewhat vague use of “the powers that be” in the Authorised Version reflected Reformation and Civil War issues with the Divine Right of Kings, which could be supported by this passage, but it is true to say that the much more individualistic and increasingly secular society which has prevailed in recent centuries has had more difficulty with the idea that all governing authorities are directly appointed by God.

Totalitarian regimes, political and religious fanatics, dogmatic sects have all made use of the belief that they are on the “side of the angels” through their God-given authority. Yet it is undoubtedly true that for humankind to live together in any kind of safe and successful society, there must be governing authorities which work to order everything for the common good.

St Augustine wrote of the Two Cities – the heavenly city or City of God which is the ultimate destination of all Christians, but also the earthly city, in which it is our Christian duty to work with people of goodwill for the order, peace and justice without which no society can exist.

Just as we say that gathering at the Altar to share in the Body of Christ provides us with a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, so we should work to make our earthly society a foretaste of God's heavenly Kingdom.

The Biblical narrative which confirms that governing authorities, structures and laws are needed to order society also prompts us to work for the transformation of our society to reflect the teachings of Christ. We may not all share the same political affiliations or the same economic ideals for how to achieve a righteous society, but Paul's summary shows us all the goal we should be seeking: *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

In respecting the needs, rights and dignity of every person, in encouraging respect for the structures and laws which hold society together in good order and above all, in calling for truth, integrity, respect, compassion and justice in the way authorities and structures operate, we may show our love for our neighbour and honour the good order which makes it possible. But how do we especially, as Christians in an area where many have wealth, influence, good connections and relevant gifts, work for transformation and good order?

Paul's declaration: *Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God,* is again less clear than Paul intended, which might sound more like this: *Whoever resists authority, resists what God has appointed.*

Should we then go along with everything expressed by the "powers that be" and never question or resist?

Even since I arrived here in Kensington, we have witnessed a stream of protests and demonstrations: supporting Extinction Rebellion or Black Lives Matter, against masks or lockdowns, or against the conflict in the Holy Land. Very few of us will have identical views on all these subjects, and quite a number may question the methods used in expressing them, and yet the passion and convictions expressed should at the very least make us consider them deeply and prayerfully.

Where do **we** stand, morally and religiously, on these issues?

Which of these protests truly express attempts to increase the law of love and show respect and compassion for our neighbour?

What **is** the right and proper way for us to make our views clear – our commitment to this law of love and dignity and justice, in ways which make use of the many gifts we have been given to play **our** part in helping our society foreshadow the City of God?

God has appointed a system of structures and authorities which enable us to live in an ordered society of peace and justice; but we should never forget he has also given each one of us a voice and a responsibility to ensure that these authorities are constantly guided and driven by the law of Love. **Amen**