

Sermon The Power of the Lamb 05.05.19
Revelation 5:11-14 St John's Church, New Barnet
Julian Templeton

My message today is: *The Power of the Lamb is the power of love made perfect in weakness.*

Some of you may remember that Laura and I visited the Greek island of Samos last year, and from the terrace of Andrew and Fiona Summers' house on the south coast of Samos we were just able at night to make out in the distance the lights of the Island of Patmos. The name Patmos might register with some of you because it is the location where John receives his revelatory vision from God, which he later writes down, and which was included in the New Testament. John, a local church leader, was in enforced exile on Patmos because he had "preached God's word and borne testimony to Jesus." (1:9). We can speculate with some accuracy that the Roman authorities exiled John on Patmos as part of the sporadic persecution of Christians that broke out from time to time. Patmos is a small island and the Roman state officials probably thought that the best way to weaken a church would be to remove its main leader by putting him in the middle of nowhere and keeping him there. Those same officials could not have predicted that John's account of his revelation from God would be circulated round many churches and would have the effect of strengthening their witness!

Those churches that read and listened to John's vision, would have received great strength and encouragement. In the midst of their difficulties and challenges the overall message they would have gained is that the suffering, death, and resurrection

of Jesus reveals the heart of God's intention for them and for the world.

When they read and heard references to 'Babylon', which was the great imperial power of the past, they would have taken it as a direct parallel to the great imperial power of their own time, Rome. All such powers will eventually fall, but God's reign revealed in Jesus will endure. However, the reign that God exercises is not like the reign of Babylon or Rome, enforced by military might and threat of force; God exercises power differently.

At the beginning of Chapter 5, in the passage that precedes the passage that Ann read to us, the One who sits on the throne holds a scroll in his right hand sealed with seven seals. The angel asks: 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' But, it seems, there is no one who is worthy to do this. One of the elders says to John, 'the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the shoot growing from David's stock, has won the right to open the scroll and its seven seals'. (5:1-5)

The Lion of Judah recalls the military might of Israel when King David and King Solomon reigned and when Israel's neighbours lived in fear of the Israelite Army. However, this so-called Lion appears in the most surprising form, for immediately John sees a Lamb with the marks of sacrifice on him. The Lamb receives the scroll from the One who sits on the throne. In this one dramatic change of image, from Lion to Lamb, John has given us the key to his interpretation of who *Jesus Christ* is in the light of Old Testament imagery, for Jesus Christ is the Lamb. It is as if John is saying, if you want to know how God will now achieve his purposes, wherever in the Old Testament you see the term "Lion" read "Lamb." Wherever the OT speaks of the victory of the Messiah or the overthrow of God's enemies,

you are to remember that the gospel message knows no other way of achieving these ends than the way of the Cross. (see Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, 74-5)

The Power of the Lamb is the power of love made perfect in weakness.

This context, then, helps us to understand why the creatures and elders and myriads of angels round the throne of God all join in a new song. It is 'new' because they realise that the Lion of Judah in all his military might is not God's chosen way to redeem the world. Rather, in the 'new' song that they sing, they recognise only the Lamb is 'worthy' to open the scroll and reveal God's secret purposes. George Caird argues that in setting before us the image of the Lamb to represent Jesus Christ, John is redefining divine power. To say that God is all-powerful no longer means that he exercises unlimited coercion but instead suggests that God exercises infinite persuasion, and this is what we see in Jesus who dies on the Cross as the sacrificial Lamb. (see Caird, *Revelation*, 75). To suggest that God exercises *infinite persuasion* is surely closer to what we read in the New Testament about God's nature as love.

This, then, is the background to the song that is sung by the creatures and elders and angels: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power..." (Rev. 5:12). It is not only *power* that the slain Lamb is worthy to receive, but also "...wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing." (5:12) In other words, *everything* accrues to the sacrificial Lamb who has by his sacrifice triumphed. And this is because: *the Power of the Lamb is the power of love made perfect in weakness.*

Jesus as crucified Lamb of God turns upside down the usual ideas about what constitutes power. More generally, I wonder whether we tend to underestimate the power of those who are lamb-like? I refer to all those, who, out of apparent weakness, dare to take on powerful people and interests.

Q: Why do you think the Swedish climate change activist, Greta Thunberg has been so influential?

Hers is not the power of superior force but the power of innocence and justice. And she has been very influential in mobilising, first of all, other schoolchildren, and also now thousands of people of all ages to be much more concerned about the imminent threat posed by climate change by staging demonstrations.

More generally, 'people power', or the power of mass demonstration is especially difficult for authoritarian and dictatorial leaders to counter. The power of the strong man, the dictator, is enforced by the threat of coercion and violence. That is often very effective when directed against a small number of dissidents in order to frighten the majority into submission. But when the majority decide to rise up, those who enforce the commands of the despot—the police and the military—often realise that they can only enforce with the cooperation of the majority of people. In other words, a large number of lambs often triumph over a small number of lions.

Might we gloss Jesus's instructions to his disciples by saying: Be wise as serpents (in your understanding of power) and as innocent as doves (in your exercise of power)? (see Matt. 10:16)

Paul, when in the grip of what he called 'a thorn in my flesh, received a message from God: "...my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:9)

The Power of the Lamb is the power of love made perfect in weakness.

In the Iona Community's *Wee Worship Book* there is a prayer that goes something like:

We pray for those who try to be tough because they've forgotten how to be tender.

In the end, the power of tenderness and kindness triumph over the power of bullying and fear.

We sometimes sing the song, 'Give thanks with a grateful heart', which has the lines:

And now let the weak say, 'I am strong',
let the poor say, 'I am rich',

The kind of 'strength' to which songwriter refers is not the strength of superior force; it is, rather, the strength of being made strong "...because of what the Lord has done for us." And it is the riches contained in having "a grateful heart". When you think about it, how strong is the person who is constantly afraid of losing power? And how rich is the person who has forgotten how to be grateful?

John's image of the sacrificial Lamb gives us an alternative vision and model. It suggests that in the end the resort of the bully to threat and intimidation and violence is actually a symptom of weakness because it reveals a lack of *patience*,

whereas the apparent weakness of the gently *persuasive* person is their greatest strength. We need, however, to be alert to the difference between persuasion and manipulation. Perhaps the distinction is that those who manipulate do so for their own benefit, whereas those who persuade do so for the benefit of all.

As examples of the latter; think of the carer who gently persuades the elderly patient that it is worth getting out of bed today; or think of the schoolteacher who gently explains to the student one more time the method of solving the problem; or think of the parent who gently distracts the toddler who has just thrown a temper-tantrum; or think of you or me when we don't try to pretend to others that Jesus solves all our problems, but we do feel able to share that Jesus strengthens us to face those same problems with faith, hope, and love.

In CS Lewis's story, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the lion, Aslan, King of Narnia, does not in the end save the kingdom by force but by becoming like a sacrificial lamb and being willing to die. But in sacrificing his own life he later comes back to life, defeats the White Witch, and Narnia, having been in continual winter, returns to spring. Aslan is, of course, a metaphor of Jesus Christ. That allegory of redemption and climate rescue encourages us to oppose the power of force and fear with the power of patience and love.

The Power of the Lamb is the power of love made perfect in weakness.

Thanks be to God.