

The exercise of power carries terrifying responsibility – not least to oneself. When one looks at our present national and international leadership one can see how power in the wrong hands can have devastating effects on others and yet seem to leave the leaders themselves quite untouched – that is, unmoved, by the plight of others. What Jesus is putting in place instead is an ethic of responsibility that is literally the ability and desire to respond to the needs of others; we sum this up in the word ‘love’. And it’s a difficult concept to keep a hold of because pleasing oneself is such a difficult thing to let go of. One can sense some wonderment here on the part of Jesus that anyone would want to have power, knowing how difficult it is to wield responsibility, that is, to pay its full price. This episode takes place after three passion predictions. How many more before the disciples understand the true nature of power? We know now that it’s only after his death and resurrection that they will begin to understand. It’s not ultimately a work of our own but a gift from another. In this passage, the mother is cast as the villain of the piece but in its parallel in Mark it’s clearly James and John who are lusting after power. Indeed, they say in no uncertain terms

Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.

and go on to ask that they might sit

one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.

No wonder the other disciples were upset but this could as well be because they too are jostling for power and reward as much as James and John or their mother – or perhaps their own mothers! Now, to counter any male or female bias there, I’ll cite a passage from the feminist theologian Sally McFague which seems sensitive to the need to walk a path which refuses either to treat others as objects only or so to fuse with the will of another that one in effect treats oneself as an object only. She sums up a series of views from a variety of feminist writers which encapsulate our tendency to either distance ourselves from others in a dyadic manner or to so fuse with others that we lose our own sense of self. The mature alternative is to recognise our fragility in the face of both our own and others’ attempts at power play but

to bear these fears and not to succumb to them, able to embrace intimacy (and not slide into incorporation or fusion) and to recognise differences (and not to retreat into hyperseparation or dualism).

(p.105.Super, Natural Christians)

There’s a lot more to be said on this but it’s a balance which depends on an *acceptance of who one is at the deepest level* which is where, of course, Christ comes back into the picture.

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