

## **The Way of Powerlessness**

One way of looking at chapters eighteen and nineteen of St. John's gospel is to see them as a conviction of power. In one scene after another Jesus stands alone before an angry mob, the whole retinue of corrupt religious power, the brutal power of an empire, ultimately he stands before the power of death. He never hides from the dark side of power. He confronts it with his simple honesty and his trust in his Father. What we see lived out in Jesus is the firm belief that the kingdom and the power and the glory are the Father's. Wavering between the calm, resolute, power-filled stance of Jesus as he chooses to stand powerless before the men of power, Annas and Pilate, and Judas' giving into the allure of power, stands Peter.

In the stories it is clear that Peter wants to follow Jesus; but like us he is so afraid. He needs Jesus. He desperately needs the deep way of life Jesus incarnates. He needs to trust in God, be simple and loyal. He longs to be faithful. He also needs to hide a lot. Many things frighten him. Powerful people make him feel small. But he still wants them to like him. Disgrace, loneliness and death he can't face at all. The mixture of all of these things in his heart leads to his inconsistent behavior. One minute he is making a great show, striking off the ear of the servant of the High Priest; the next he is so frightened that he can't even bring himself to admit he knows Jesus to a little serving girl. Still, this

confusing behavior is not unknown to us, for as we inhabit these stories we can once again see how much we are like Peter. If "perfect love banishes fear" (1 Jn. 4:18) then it is clear that Peter's love and my love are not perfect. I easily get afraid, and then I grab for something to make me strong. Like Peter I look to power.

Holding these images in my heart I start to get glimpses into what is in my heart. Peter and you and I live with huge needs. We need to be understood, accepted, loved. We desperately need to know we are worthwhile, and cherished. But these authentic needs can be distorted and then I'll go after mere security, pleasure, power. In either case I cannot satisfy these needs on my own. I go out to others. When I get desperate I am forced into a position of depending on others for these things. Then I don't go out to the others free to love and understand them, inviting the same gift in return. I go out to get what I need to escape my weakness. Here I live half strangled by fears. I fear these powerful others on whom I must depend. I fear I am not really loved or esteemed; I doubt I am worthwhile. I begin to wonder if somewhere, somehow, I haven't done something utterly terrible that has left me tarnished, though I'm not at all sure what it could be. I fear the support and attention I so desperately need will be taken away. Here I tend to panic. In the midst of this endemic insecurity I reach out to manipulate people and situations to get what I feel I need. In this fear I both accept, even greedily seek out, what I want; but I also resent those to whom I go. This is a deep but unseen distortion cutting me off from the mutual understanding and love for which my heart was made. Sometimes this becomes written so deeply into us that we become trapped in our pathetic weakness.

In these stories Peter is baffled, confused and finally

terribly threatened. That's when he panics. This weakness traps him, pulling him away from that for which he really longs. Peter seems to have an inkling of this, and even after the disaster in the garden this draws him on to the High Priest's house. As I turn these frightening stories over in my heart I, too, sense there is something here. Still, like Peter I find Jesus' free and consistent choice to be powerless more than I can bear. Somewhere, it attacks me. Because of that Peter and I respond not just with incomprehension, though there is an element of that, but with violent rejection. I start out distorting what Jesus is saying and doing because I look at him through the eyes of my fear and pathetic weakness. Then I have to reject what he says and does to protect myself. "No one could live like that," I tell myself. "After all, you have to be realistic." But saying this within these stories rings hollow. I can tell there is something false about it.

I begin to remember other stories in the gospels where Jesus' stark simplicity stands revealed, other instances where he seems to speak of a strength that comes from freely choosing to be powerless.

And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.

(Mark 10:13-16)

This means much more than the simple fact that Jesus was fond of little children. Holding it in my heart, going back to it day after day, I gradually see it as one of Jesus' paradoxes. It is one of those simple little sayings or actions that seems so tame until one day it comes alive to turn reality on its ear.

Jesus' consistent call throughout the gospels is to adult decision, to take the awful responsibility for one's own life. This is precisely what little children cannot do. In all things that really matter they have to depend on others. What then does Jesus mean when he says, "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"? What is he saying to me? Surely, this is the Lord's invitation to admit that ultimately I cannot save myself. I can do many things for myself; but in all the decisive things, life, death, a meaning to existence, I have to depend on him. Freed by my trust in him and his Father's love, I can face that; indeed I can freely choose to put aside all pretense that I can do for myself and confidently entrust all my hope in him. I can freely decide to be the Father's little one. This is the paradox: that someone who really had a sense of their own worth, who could deal with other people, who in a multiplicity of ways was strong, resourceful, who could face the awful responsibility for his own life, should freely choose not to rely on that but on the Father's love alone. This is the way into the kingdom.

With this paradox echoing in my heart, the beatitudes come back to me. If I could live in this paradox, if I really could see and accept my utter dependence; more, if strengthened by God's love I could rejoice that I was called to seek all my safety in my beloved Father, then I could come home to the beatitudes. If I could freely choose to rely on the Father, in childlike simplicity, I could afford to be poor because I wouldn't be hiding from my weakness in riches. I would have already dealt with that in handing myself over to my Father. I could be free to embrace the sorrow and confusion of others because he had strengthened me to do so. I could be meek with the powerful because my security would not come from them but from my Father. This would

be so because in my own way I had done what Jesus had done before me, done for me: handed over his life and even his death to his Father.

The love that the beloved Father lavishes on us heals us of our enfeebling weakness, a weakness that so terrorizes us that we seek to grasp at power and security wherever we can find them. Swamped by our own weakness we cling to money, position, pleasure, power, even blatant injustice, indeed anything that might offer escape. This is the very opposite of the beatitudes. But the hope, the challenge of the beatitudes is: how blessed is the man or woman freed to live beyond all of that, freed to live in the kingdom. As I come back again to chapters eighteen and nineteen I can feel how I, too, am being called to live in that kingdom, to choose to trust only in the power of the Father. This liberation is radically dependent on the free gift of the Father's love, but it also calls for a decision on our part. The Father's love pouring into our hearts opens them up so that we can leave behind these false saviors, if we choose to. But this choice is experienced as a wrenching. As the Spirit drew Jesus out into the desert of choice after his baptism, so these stories bring to speech the invitation that is addressed to me, drawing me into the desert of renunciation and decision.

This is a land of disaffection. It is hard to leave behind comfort and selfish dreams to follow Jesus. More than that is asked of us now. Here we have to leave behind the very stratagems we use to protect ourselves. It may be a false self we are protecting, but it is the self we feel we are and desperately sense we have to defend. This fragile self has clothed itself with ways of acting that seemed innocent or at least necessary. There is the habitual inclination to use one's gifts to draw attention to the self, and there is the darker danger of collaborating in the dominion of evil. The

temptation is to accept the often brutal use of power in the world, to begin to align one's self with it even in little ways. To override or disregard others by a show of one's gifts or one's ruthlessness, to thoughtlessly exploit the advantage age or position bring, to carefully manipulate instead of being simple and forthright. To abandon these ingrained ways of acting is to leave one's self vulnerable, undefended. This is more than scary.

The gospels tell us that Jesus was attacked in the desert. But when he came out of the desert he was ready. In story after story we see that he was a man who knew that he was the beloved of the Father and who chose to rely on that and not on whatever power or security he could create or discover for himself. Grounded in his Father's love, imaginative, capable of deep human intimacy and fidelity, blessed with charismatic gifts, he chose to proclaim the miracle of his Father's love in utter simplicity. This is a man who is strong. He knows who he is and what he will do. He does not hide from his Father or from himself and so he doesn't need to hide from others. He invites people into fellowship with him; but he never manipulates them. If they choose to open their hearts to him and his Father, he rejoices; if they choose to go another way, he lets them go. But he does not stop loving them. He is not defensive. He has it out with the Pharisees time and again, but he still keeps listening for the honest question, the open and sincere heart. He is himself with rich and poor, prostitute and pious Jew. He can weep over Jerusalem because he loves her, and yet challenge her for the same reason. This is not a weak man, someone who is powerless because he is pathetic. This is a man who has chosen to trust in his Father's power and in nothing else, so that when men and women follow him it is not because they are awed by his

power, or dazzled by his miracles, but because the miracle of his Father's love has broken into their hearts with its startling strangeness and healed them. In his daily actions he constantly reaffirms his choice of the way of powerlessness.

This is something of what we see in chapters eighteen and nineteen. When the mob comes to get him, knowing exactly what he is doing, he meets them with the simple, "I am he." They recoil. When he is taken before the High Priest he does not pretend or try to hide. He cuts through the maneuvering and calmly takes his stand on his word. Caiphas doesn't quite know what to do. Before Pilate this reversal of who is really strong is even starker. Pilate has the soldiers, but it is Jesus who is steadfast. Pilate gives in to pressure, for power is his god; Jesus quietly holds fast to the path of powerlessness he entered when he left the desert. Before the last power, death, he is faithful to his Father. He gives away his life.

As I open my heart to these stories, letting them reverberate within me, and as you do the same, aren't we aware that we are being called to follow our master in this too? Jesus certainly wasn't naive. He knew what was in men's hearts. He saw clearly what was coming. But he never looked to power to protect himself. Out of this seems to come Jesus' admonition to his disciples to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt. 10:17). As these stories sink into us this call becomes tangible; and we are brought face to face with the times and places where we embrace power, times when we go along with others without really wondering where the truth lies, places where we don't listen but try to dominate. We remember with remorse all sorts of things, some little, others much more devastating, when to protect ourselves or to get our way, or just out of habit, we hid in power. These stories force us to admit that here we

hand ourselves over to the power of darkness. This is part of our refusal to really trust in the Father the way Jesus did. It is a refusal to enter into the intimacy Jesus shared with his Father, where he knew he was loved and understood by his Father, and gave over his whole heart in return. That intimacy was at the center of his being and it gave him the strength to stand innocently and gently unbowed before the men of power. Here in these stories he calls you and me to follow in his way, to open our hearts to his Father and, relinquishing our futile attempts to prop ourselves up, to let his Father do it.

Really it is no accident that Jesus consistently chose to be powerless. It is part of his eschatological mission, for it clearly makes manifest that the only real power is the power of the Father. This is startling, confusing, because it embodies the great reversal, the turning inside out and upside down of all human expectation. Gently, sometimes abruptly, the Lord is challenging us to abandon our attempts to seize power and control. He is inviting us to freely choose to hand over the control of our lives to the Father with childlike simplicity. The invitation goes even beyond this. We are called to deal with people from the midst of this simplicity as Jesus did, where there is no hidden agenda, where we are not naive, where we choose to live without grasping at power, and in that invite others to do the same.