

Homily St John's Church Bath  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year 2011.

Readings Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19; Romans 8: 26-27;  
Matthew 13;24-43.

It may be the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the year but it is also the first Sunday after the News of the World. How shall we now spend our Sundays? Beneath a rather sordid story of phone hacking and ruthless journalism, there is another even more serious story about power. Where in the world does it lie – with elected leaders or with unelected media barons? Who calls the shots – which is Almighty?

Now in our Creed we confess our faith in one even mightier than Cameron or Murdoch. We believe in God the Father Almighty. Indeed, as our first reading declares, God's justice is not just some nice ideal but has its source in God's Strength. That is – it is effective. So, when 'proud man dressed in a little brief authority, questions God's sovereign power, God is said to 'expose the insolence' of that questioner. It is a pretty 'slap-down' picture of 'almightiness'. Before such sovereign power what can we do but click our heels and obey?

And that, it has to be said, is the picture of 'almightiness' with which we have often lived – a God even more powerful than Prime Ministers and Press barons. And, in the image of this 'Top-Down' God, we have fashioned a 'Top-Down' Church. Decisions are made far away above us, orders are shouted down to us, and all we have to do is bow and say 'Yes Father'.

But that ‘Top-Down’ God is not the true and living God and that ‘Top Down’ Church is not the true Catholic Church. God as Holy Trinity, the God of the giving and receiving of love blows apart this Top hierarchical God, which is in fact the product of the old Arian heresy – a god fashioned to uphold hierarchical societies and totalitarian rules. The Almightyness, of which our Scriptures today speak, is said to be that which makes God ‘lenient to all’. ‘You are mild in judgement and govern us with great lenience.’ As the Psalmist declares, this is ‘the God of mercy and compassion.’ And, as Jesus in the Gospel shows, this is the God who, confronted by the weeds sown amongst the crop, resists our urge to get on and rip up these weeds. This is the God who, in his wise patience, says ‘Stay your hand for you may find yourself pulling up wheat as well as weeds. Let both grow together until the harvest and then we shall know which is which.

But you see it is God’s very strength, which gives him this patience, which makes him mild in judgement. ‘Oh it is excellent to have a giant’s strength’ writes Shakespeare ‘but tyrannous to use it like a giant.’ These words come from his play ‘Measure for Measure’. Here Isabel is pleading for the life of her brother before the powerful ice-cold pious-appearing Angelo. Her defence begins quietly and cautiously enough but then breaks out into a passionate assault on the abuse of authority on ‘every pelting petty officer who uses his little heaven ( of power) for Thunder , nothing but Thunder! This is ‘proud man, dressed in a little brief authority, Most ignorant of what he is most assured.’ It makes, cries Isabel, the angels weep. Yes, ‘weep’ because it is

in truth rather pathetic, a toughness which is at heart weakness.

Although the Tabloids smell weakness in mercy and demand ever-tougher policies, and, although politicians compete to be those whose muscles ripple the most, the reality is that this show of toughness simply masks weakness and insecurity. As we saw in the sudden crumbling of the Soviet empire and, as we now see in North Africa and the Middle East, tyranny is in truth fragile, more vulnerable than it looks. Its brutality and repression of dissent simply expose its weakness.

John Henry Newman saw this is the Church. Its thinkers, he said, were having to 'fight under the lash' and were having their 'freedom of intellect beaten out of them'. And so he turned to those words of Shakespeare; 'Oh it is excellent to have a giant's strength but tyrannous to use it like a giant'. It is not strong faith, which sacks dissenters and stifles debate, but a lack of confidence, a fearful defensive spirit. It was strength of faith which led Blessed Pope John 23<sup>rd</sup> to throw open the gates of the Catholic Church and lead us out from behind its walls. It was a mighty confidence that set truth free to be spoken in love. This was no 'liberal wishey-washiness' but a deep trust in that God 'full of love' who 'cares for everything'.

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