

There's been a lot of talk about power in the news this week. A new government has come to power in the UK, and I'll just point out, six weeks after the election was called. There's a shift of power going on perhaps in France at this very moment. And over here we've heard a lot of talk about the power of the Supreme Court and the power of presidents. And all this has alerted me to the references to power that there are in our readings set for today. In fact, all three of the readings make reference to power.

In the Samuel reading it says, "So all the elders came, and David made a covenant with them. And they anointed David as king over Israel." Now, I know you don't like kings over here, but you'll have to admit there's a certain appeal to the simplicity of that process. But I'll leave that for you to consider. In the gospels, the people of Nazareth say to Jesus, "What deeds of power are being done by his hands?" And then we're told, he could do no deeds of power there. And finally, in the epistle, St. Paul says two interesting things about power. He says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." And he goes on, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

Now, I'm going to stick with St. Paul and explore the two things that he says in that epistle about power. So firstly, power is made perfect in weakness. That's a very odd thing to say, but it perhaps feels less odd to us because it's so characteristic of Christianity. One of the most unusual things about our tradition is the claim is that God is revealed through weakness. We worship a God who made the universe and yet we believe is most clearly seen in a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem, who after growing up is convicted and executed as a criminal. In that life, with all its frailty and vulnerability, God, we believe, is seen most clearly. God didn't come to us with all the trappings of human power. His revelation to us was made perfect in weakness.

Now, I'm not quite sure what Paul's saying at the beginning of that reading the epistle, but I do get him saying that he'll only boast in his weakness and

that God gave him a thorn in his flesh to keep him from being too elated. And three times he asked God to take this thorn away. But God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, what is true of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, that he is most clearly seen in frailty and weakness and vulnerability.

It's true in our lives as well. God is most powerfully at work in our lives when we are at our weakest. Paul's thinking was echoed a few years ago in a very famous TED Talk by Brené Brown. The title of the talk was The Power of Vulnerability. And Brown has spent her life considering the subjects of shame and vulnerability, and she describes shame as that which makes us think to ourselves, "You're not good enough. And however hard you try, you're never going to be good enough."

When shame rules our lives, we constantly feel inadequate and the need to prove ourselves, which is an exhausting and demoralizing way to live. But Brown discovered a way to undermine shame by cutting it off at its source. The root of shame is the need to prove ourselves worthy, the assumption that with more and more work and effort, we can make ourselves better and win the love and acceptance of which we are worthy. But after living that way for years, we discover that no amount of effort is enough.

Brown discovered the power of embracing our vulnerability, which involves recognizing that we are weak, and letting our weakness be an opportunity for growth. Rather than letting our shame and weakness close us off from people, Brown suggests that it should instead open us up to recognize in other people their brokenness and vulnerability. Vulnerability is powerful because it refuses to play the shame game. Shame says, "You're not good enough." Vulnerability says, "Yeah. So what? None of us are good enough. What does good enough mean anyway?"

Vulnerability, says Brown, is the source of joy, creativity, and love. What Brené Brown discovered is the concept of divine grace that so gripped St. Paul. She's teaching people to stop listening to the

voices of accusation and condemnation and instead listen to the voice of truth which echoes St. Paul. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Human weakness is not a problem for God. Rather, it's an opportunity to show his power.

For God to work in our life, we don't need to be strong. We don't need to be perfect. We don't need to have everything together. We simply need to let ourselves be loved and receive God's grace. God seems to work best with deficient and broken people like you and me. And I learnt that lesson probably the hard way, when I'd been rector of my last church for two years in London and it had all gone horribly wrong. I arrived thinking, "I've got the education, the background, the skills to make this work. I'll be good at this rectoring thing," except I wasn't. And when things got tough, I lent more and more into my skills and my natural gifts. I just felt I needed to work harder. And it wasn't enough. It was only when I acknowledged after two years to myself and to God that I couldn't go on, that I found the resources to flourish. I learned like St. Paul that God's grace is sufficient and that his power is made perfect in our weakness.

Paul's second point is related to the first. He talks of how the power of Christ may dwell in me. And this is a constant theme in Paul's writings. He's always encouraging his readers, urging them to draw on the resources and the power of God's Holy Spirit that dwells within God's people. He writes this to the Romans, and I quote this verse often because we could spend a lifetime meditating on what this verse means for us. St. Paul writes there, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."

There was a missionary once called Herbert Jackson who took up a new posting in some foreign country, and with the house came a car that didn't work properly. And he worked out that he could only get this car working if his wife pushed him off in the morning. He either parked on an incline so he could get some momentum to start back up

again, or he left the car idling when he did whatever he had to do. He's very proud of this system, so that when it came time to move on in his successor came, he started to explain to him about the car and how he worked out this great way of keeping the car running. And whilst he was explaining his clever plans to his successor, his successor put up the bonnet, looked inside and hooked up something that had come loose and said, "Actually, Herbert, I fixed the problem. You just needed this to be tightened, and now it'll stop and start on the flat wherever." The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection prevented Herbert Jackson from getting that car working properly.

And God's power is there for us if only we draw on it. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence in our lives. Why do we so often labor on under our own steam and not draw on God's power and resources? We all do it.

I've got one more observation to make about power from the gospels. I was very struck by the fact that when Jesus went back to his hometown of Nazareth, we're told he could do no deed of power there. Somehow, he was constrained by the attitude of his townspeople. They said to themselves, "We know this guy. He's the carpenter. He's Mary's son. Who does he think he is?" Their familiarity with Jesus restricted him, held him back. And the disconcerting truth about the gospel that we read this week is that we, the church, are the equivalent of the townspeople in Nazareth. We're the ones perhaps over familiar with Jesus and his ways. We're the ones who can take offense when he does something new that we don't recognize or feel comfortable. A kind of religious over familiarity.

What will it take for us to see things in a new way, to recognize Jesus in new people, new ideas? That's a challenge for us. We're called to be open, to being surprised by God's power, and we need to learn to live our lives drawing on the resources of God's divine power. Amen.