

Sermon for Christ the King Evensong – 23rd November 2014

2 Samuel 23:1-7 and Matthew 28: 16-end

Today is 'Christ the King' and on Tuesday it's the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which was designated by the UN. Violence against women happens everywhere, all the time. Around the world, 1 in 3 women will experience violence from men at some point in their lives and in the UK it's 1 in 4. In the UK, a woman is assaulted in her own home every 6 seconds. Domestic violence *can and does* happen to men but it is almost overwhelmingly against women. It can involve a whole range of controlling and bullying behaviours like physical violence against her, restricting her money, stopping her from having contact with family and friends, constant verbal abuse, isolating her, destroying her possessions, hurting her children or pets, stalking her, lying and manipulating her by shouting, swearing, sulking and making her live in fear.

This happens all over the UK, everywhere, it happens in Norfolk, it happens in King's Lynn. And as well as the mental torture this causes, it can also lead to death. One or two women are killed every week in the UK by a current or former partner.

It is hard to listen to and it is hard to think about but it's also very important that we talk about it because it is hidden behind closed doors. Christianity can be used to justify a lot of things, including abuse of power – but it doesn't and it's vital to look at how our faith stands against this kind of domination over vulnerable people.

The first reading from 2 Samuel records David's oracle where he says that God rules over people justly or in some translations 'with righteousness.' God does not abuse the enormous power that he has. It does then say 'ruling in the fear of God.' Fear is a huge part of domestic violence so this seems to reinforce that fear is part of our religion too. No. I don't think it does. God is the mighty ruler of the world and King of Kings but he does not want us to live in fear of him. Exactly the opposite actually. Fear could mean awe, honour, respect – like we would have for our own monarchy if we met them - but not terror. 1 John 4 says, 'there is no fear in love.' There is no fear in love. And in 1 John it is stated that 'God is love.' God does not want us to be terrified of him.

In verse 5 of the 2 Samuel reading, it says 'will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?'

God does want us to prosper and flourish. Jeremiah 29:11 says 'For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' God wants the best for us.

In the second reading from Matthew 28, Jesus says 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' He is the embodiment of God so he has the power and authority that God has. From Jesus' actions, we can see what God is like and how God uses power.

How does Jesus use this incredible authority that he has?

- In Mary's Song, the Magnificat, that we have heard sung tonight, Mary says 'he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.'
- In John 8, Jesus stops a woman caught in adultery from being stoned. He saves her life.
- Jesus defends a sinful woman from the Pharisees when she anoints his feet because they are judging and scorning her in Luke 7.
- Jesus defends Mary after Martha complains that her sister isn't helping her in the kitchen. Jesus said women don't belong in the kitchen, folks!
- In John 12, Mary took costly ointment and anointed him and he defends her from his disciples who say she should have given the money to the poor. He says 'leave her alone.'

I hadn't gone looking in the Gospels for Jesus defending women – I was looking for Jesus defending anyone but the stories that I found were of his protection of women.

Jesus was peaceful. He didn't want a bloody revolution, he told Peter to put his sword away in the Garden of Gethsemane.

His one action of violence was overthrowing tables in the Temple because he was so incensed at the people in the Temple abusing the power they had. People went to the Temple to give a sacrifice to God and they were made to

change their normal currency into 'Temple money' with commission to the money changers of course. And then they were charged for the animal they could afford. This was sacrificed to God but the priests got to eat most of it as part of their own payment. Jesus called it a den of robbers because the ordinary people who wanted to worship God were being robbed by those running the show. That abuse of power was what made him so cross.

Christianity can be and is used to justify all kinds of things, including domestic violence. Too easily, the words about God's might and power can seem to reinforce power in human hierarchy especially when added to the male language we use for God. The passages about forgiveness can feel like pressure on those suffering from domestic violence to allow it to continue. When Jesus' suffering on the cross is held up as an example to all, then suffering can feel like a noble model to follow.

But God does not use might and power like human beings. Jesus used his power to defend and protect women. And God is not male or female but beyond gender, so God does not reinforce domination of one gender over another. Forgiveness is complicated and is not a weapon to keep people under the thumb of someone else. And Jesus suffered so that we don't have to. God doesn't want us to suffer and instead, 'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Amen.