

John 12: 20-33 The Ruler of this world?

21st March 2021 Online

Father God, we thank you for your word. Open our hearts and minds that we may hear what you want to say to us today. Amen.

As always with John's Gospel, there is a lot going on in these few verses: Some Greeks, that is, Gentiles, come seeking out Jesus, a sign of things to come and the spreading of the Word beyond the boundaries of Palestine and Judaism. Jesus then speaks of the glory that God the Father will give him; he refers to his forthcoming death and reveals his anguish at what awaits him; he challenges his followers and would-be followers, saying that we must be prepared to give up our life in order to gain real life; he speaks of the coming hour of judgement, and he makes this extraordinary statement: "Now the ruler of this world will be driven out."

I have often pondered on what this means. Who is Jesus referring to as the ruler of this world? Isn't God supposed to be the ruler, the one in charge? So if Jesus isn't talking about God as the ruler of this world, who does he mean? We naturally think he must be referring to the devil, however you conceive of him, perhaps the force of evil that seeks to overturn the will of God and fight against the coming of God's Kingdom here on earth.

Many Christians believe that God's power is supreme, that he is the Almighty, directing all that occurs. So they believe that because God is God, then everything that happens must be God's will. Many non-Christians think this too, and for many people it is the reason why they reject the whole idea of this God and of Christianity and faith. And I can understand them. Famously, Stephen Fry has said he cannot believe in a God who allows children to suffer terrible diseases. Just recently a lady said to me that what faith she had had before the pandemic had faded away completely because of this virus and the death and suffering it has caused to so many people. If God is really in control, in charge of everything, why doesn't he just stop it?

So where does that leave us? It is a particularly relevant question as we approach Good Friday and face the suffering of Jesus. Did he really go, as some hymns would tell us, 'cheerfully' to the cross? I don't think the gospel accounts support that idea. They make it clear that Jesus is troubled, anguished, that he would like to avoid the agony that lies ahead. But, he says, not my will but your will be done.

When Jesus says this, is he indicating that death on the cross is actually *God's will* for him? We often think of it that way. But perhaps what it means is that God's will, God's way of love and mercy and non-violence is what should be done by Jesus: Jesus in his agony and dread is asking for the strength, for the resolution to remain firm in the stand that he is taking, not to buckle under pressure or torture, not to deny the way of love that he has spent his adult life demonstrating and preaching about.

For me, this makes more sense than believing that God sent Jesus specifically to be killed. I believe God *knew* that this would happen, he *knew* that Jesus' message and challenge would be just too much for the people and the religious leaders to swallow and that they would try to do away with him, silence him and be free to carry on as though he had never been. God could foresee that they would kill Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean that God *willed* Jesus' murder.

Jesus remained true to his Father, and the people had him crucified. Was that God's will being done? With this pandemic that we're going through, has God's will been done? Did God really send this awful virus to punish us, or to make us think harder about life and death? Does God send us the other diseases and disasters that hit us and shatter our lives, our hopes, our dreams? Do the bad things happen on God's orders, to teach us a lesson?

Well, I don't believe so. I note sayings like this one of Jesus about the ruler of this world; I note Jesus' telling us to pray that God's will might be done, on earth as it is in heaven –

implying clearly that God's will *isn't* always being done on earth.

And I think of St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (Ch.6) where he says:

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against *the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil* in the heavenly places.” That is a fairly scary list, and I confess I don't know exactly what St Paul means.

But I recognise in those words the sense of a presence of evil among us. We see this at its worst in some of the barbaric acts carried out by extremist groups and even some governments, as well as individuals. We know in ourselves at times the impulse to do or say what we know is not right or pleasing to God. Sometimes we fight against it, sometimes, sadly, we give in. Again, as St Paul says in Romans 7:19 “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” We all know that we don't always do God's will. So why should we imagine that everything that happens is because God has willed it?

So, if all the bad stuff that happens is not God's will, but happens because we are subject to some evil force that seems to be at work in the world and even in ourselves, where does this leave God? Is our God NOT the omnipotent one, the all-powerful ruler over everything? And if we decide that God is not all-powerful and in control of everything, then is there no hope?

Yes, there *is* hope. Because of Jesus. Because although he died, that was not the end of him, as the authorities had hoped and expected. Because his life was totally surrendered to the Father, utterly filled with the power of God's Holy Spirit, *through* him God could cast out the ruler of this world and make Jesus victorious. God overpowered the forces of evil that would stifle the love shown by Jesus, and God showed that he had won this victory by raising Jesus to new life in the resurrection. You may remember the words of the song Lord of the Dance:

I danced on the Sabbath
And I cured the lame;
The holy people
Said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped
And they hung me on high,
And they left me there
On a Cross to die.

I danced on a Friday
When the sky turned black
It's hard to dance
With the devil on your back.
They buried my body
And they thought I'd gone,
But I am the Dance,
And I still go on.

They cut me down
And I leapt up high;
I am the life
That'll never, never die;
I'll live in you
If you'll live in me -
I am the Lord
Of the Dance, said he.

Because God has shown us that life, shown us his ultimate power over evil, we can trust that God will be with us as he was with Jesus. We can trust that when we suffer, he will be with us and lead us through the pain; and that out of our disasters, if we allow him, he will bring some good, some hope, some change in the way we see the world and each other. He will not leave us hanging on our cross alone for evermore. We may go through our own Good Fridays, but Easter Sunday awaits us. Because he is faithful, and because we now know that the ruler of this world has been cast out and will not have the last word. Amen.

<https://youtu.be/zDdQhsjNHcw> Lord of the Dance