

Sermon: All Things Under His Feet

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Oct 30, 2022)

You are undoubtedly familiar with the saying that ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. Recently, we have been treated with the horrifying news of executives at Hockey Canada, a few men and women who wielded near absolute power with no accountability, who had allowed a culture of toxic masculinity to fester and grow for a prolonged period of time. In their pursuit of winning at all cost, that is winning for the men’s junior hockey team in the international tournaments. These executives have permitted sexual misconducts and assaults orchestrated by elite hockey players, those under their care, to go unaddressed.

We have learned that multiple, and I stress, multiple slush funds had been set up, to pay off victims of sexual assaults, mostly young girls who were courageous enough to complain, to speak up. We learned the true purpose of these slush funds was to hush the complainants, to buy their silence and compliance, so that hockey at the elite level would continue, and the perpetrators untouched.

As reports of these shenanigans were making the news, and those in charge of Hockey Canada were called to appear before parliamentary committees, we saw those in power desperately and shamelessly tried to hold on to power. First by denying any wrongdoing, then justifying their misconducts and blaming others for making such a big fuss. It wasn’t until multiple corporate sponsors began to cut ties with Hockey Canada, that these executives came to the realization their time is up, that the emperor has no cloth, and finally were forced to resign.

By Canadian standard, it is a sordid affair, a sad tale for many hockey parents who had naively trusted the institution that should’ve represented the best of best of the hockey tradition in Canada, a country where hockey is universally embraced to a fanatical degree as if it is the unofficial religion of this country. It is a cautionary tale for all of us that, truly, ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’.

What then do we make sense of the claim by the Apostle Paul, that God has put all things under the feet of Christ, that is all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named (Eph. 1:20-23). How should we view such an absolute power wielded by Jesus

Christ, the head of the Christian Church? How could we trust Christ to be benevolent? Could we trust Jesus to be good?

The lectionary text today, chosen based on the celebration of “All Saints” is worthy of our attention. Daniel, the prophet, prophesied in the time of the exile, in the court of Persian kings, around 6th century BC. Chronologically speaking, Daniel came shortly after Ezekiel, who first prophesied to the exiled community by the river Chebar, by the river of Babylon.

In Daniel’s vision which the prophet received in a dream, he saw four great beasts coming out of the sea, stirred by the four winds of heaven. There has been much scholarly debate on these beasts, as to their motifs, the sources of these fantastical imageries, and what they represent. Suffice to say they are the four kings and kingdoms that compete with God and with each other for power and authority. You will also note that today’s lectionary passage conveniently bypasses the verses that describe these beasts, as too much ink has been spilled on this subject, and not enough attention has been paid to imagery that truly matters—that is the Ancient of Days seated on a heavenly throne, and the Son of Man coming before the throne.

In Canaanite mythology, the head of the gods is El, who is often depicted as an old man. Among his titles are ‘judge’, ‘father’, and a curious phrase that is usually taken to mean ‘father of years’. Perhaps Daniel is borrowing from that imagery that would have been well known to his audience, yet expanding it to convey the both extreme—that is the ancient and the current. For the Lord God who is seated on the throne is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the God who stands above history, above time and space.

This Ancient of Days is seated on a throne, which is described as fiery flames with wheels as burning fire. His clothing was white as snow and his hair was like pure wool. For those who are familiar with Ezekiel’s vision of the throne of God, you would undoubtedly find certain similarities.

Studying the Scripture, especially interlinearly, that is connecting different parts of the Bible into a cohesive whole is quite rewarding and fun. It is like finding a needle in a hay stack, or finding a fine gem amongst a pile of rocks. Sometimes, I meet fellow Christians eager to jump right into reading the book of Revelation. I understand. Who wouldn’t want to know the future, to know what is ahead? My advise to them is always the same,

marinate yourself in the book of Ezekiel and Daniel, then you will come to a much better appreciation of the genius of these biblical writers, a much better appreciation of when we say, 'the Scripture is the inspired words of God'.

Let us come back to Daniel 7, appearing before the Ancient of Days is, in the Aramaic language, 'bar-enouch', which literally means 'son of humankind'. This is, once again, remarkably similar to the preferred title by which God addresses Prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's case, since it was written in Hebrew, the actual word used is 'ben-adam', or literally 'son of Adam'.

Ezekiel may simply be an ordinary mortal, who came before the Lord God, who was called to prophesy to the rebellious house of Israel, but the son of humankind who came before the Ancient of Days is anything but ordinary. For the Scripture informs us this extraordinary person would be *"given dominion, and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."* (Daniel 7:14)

It should come as no surprise that the preferred title Jesus often refers himself is the Son of Man, or *Υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* in Greek. For example: *"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* (Matthew 8:20) *"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."* (Mark 9:31) *"And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God."* (Luke 12:8) *"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory."* (Luke 21:27)

The point that I am making is this: the Son of Man is a title of both humiliation and exaltation at the same time. Humiliation because Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, who did not grasp tightly onto his godship, but chose to become human, the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. He travelled the earth like a common preacher, rejected by power to be in his days, betrayed by one of his disciples, and was crucified, hung on a tree like a common criminal. Exaltation because by his humble submission to the will of God, God raised him from the dead, and exalted him to sit at the right hand side of God, and gave him the name that is above every other name, that every knee should bend and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

This Son of Man is both here now, and will come again. He is the living Christ who has already ushered in the Kingdom of God, yet he will come again in the cloud accompanying by angels and heavenly hosts, in glory and in power, and his dominion shall be an everlasting dominion that will never pass away.

Could this power be trusted? Would the dominion of Jesus be benevolent, be good? Would Christ be incorruptible? I don't know. I guess that is where faith comes in, but it is not totally blind.

In his writing *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sought to reinterpret the role of Christianity in the modern world. Bonhoeffer saw that Christ is first and foremost a 'reality'; reality is first and foremost a description of who Christ is. Jesus is not just a risen and ascended Christ waiting to come again in glory in some distant future. Christ is here, present, alive and living still amongst us. Christ continues to gather, to uphold and to send forth faithful people in every generation, to witness to his reconciliation works in his redeeming way.

While the Scripture tells us that God is placing all things under Christ's feet, in a very real way, we are the hands and feet of Jesus. What we do and what we say says a lot about the dominion of Christ. But we are not alone, for the Spirit of God and of Christ is with us, sustaining our works, inspiring other to follow, correcting our ways when necessary, guiding us and even going before us.

We are not perfect, far from it, but we strive to be. What I do see gives me plenty of hope. I see faithful Christians, saints really, passing on faith in Christ to the next generation. I see faithful Christians, saints really, visiting the shut-ins, offering their friendship and companionship. I see faithful Christians, saints really, organizing local farmers into co-ops in order to provide more equitable and sustainable farming. I see faithful Christians, saints really, comforting parents who have lost their child to illness, not with words but with their presence. I see faithful Christians, saints really, rallying or protesting in support of those who are oppressed in some systemic ways. I see faithful Christians, saints really, making a real difference in small but not insignificant ways in the daily lives of many, all in the name of Jesus. I see faithful Christians, saints really, worshipping and praising God in their communities of faith, even when the society at large have mostly forgotten the way of Christ.

For all these saints, of the past, the present, and the ages to come, I give thanks to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.