

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 16th November 2025 i.e. 2nd Sunday before Advent.

Malachi 4:1-2a

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

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

In a nutshell, what I want to say this morning is that Christians have a problem with power, and with authority. The reason for this is straightforward; the solution is much less straightforward.

Christians claim to believe that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to one man, Jesus Christ. The writings of the New Testament and all explicit Christian teaching since then are completely unambiguous about that. It is a basic principle of Christianity, summed up in the statement that “Jesus Christ is Lord” [e.g. Philippians 2:11]. It's very easy to say that you think all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ; but it is another thing to act as if you believe it.

So in different seasons of the Church's life Christians have acted on all sorts of alternative beliefs about power and authority. In other words, we've found lots of different ways of to avoid behaving as if Jesus is Lord. To make matters worse each variety of Christianity is very good at noticing the failure of other Christians to give Jesus his due; but we remain largely blind to our own failures on that score.

I listened to a series of podcasts recently about a notorious Evangelical church in Seattle called Mars Hill. The church closed its doors in twenty-fifteen after lots of people accused its leaders of bullying and “persistent sinful behaviour”. But if I thought I was listening to a podcast about the failings of a community a long way away I was going to be disappointed: a lot of what is described in the series could have happened in the Church of England (and probably has at different times).

I was struck by an interview in that series with a Christian clinical psychologist, Dr Diane Langberg. In her work she supports the victims of Church-related trauma. I'd like to quote her concluding remark about Mars Hill; but it's really about Christianity and power:

[She says,] I think in our country [she's talking about the USA] we as Christians have ceased to think that the most important thing that we do is [to] be like Christ, who serves “the least

of these”. That's not what we've been doing; we've been garnering fame and numbers and money and alignment with secular power that makes us look good and baptising the whole...thing... And it's become more and more obvious... and it's ugly and its divisive and it's really not about Christ at all. And it breaks God's heart.

[Diane Langburg, interviewed in *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, Episode 1]

Words that could have been used to describe the settlement of the Church of England at almost any time in its five-hundred-odd years of history.

For what it's worth, I believe in the Anglican experiment. The Church of England has always embodied a kind of spiritual tug-of-war. Will the Church succeed in converting secular power into an agent of the kingdom of God? Or will the trappings of secular power distract the Church of England from its final purpose? I don't think you can avoid that tug-of-war by becoming a Catholic or a Non-Conformist; it will always be a part of living as a Christian in the world, as the victims of Mars Hill can testify. But I can imagine a situation where that balance has shifted – where the English establishment begins pulling harder than the kingdom of God – and that's a world where I might not want to be an Anglican any more. I don't think we're there yet.

As I've said, the tension, the tug-of-war, will always be there in some form or other. Being a Christian means being attentive to the temptations inherent in our tradition, in the season we find ourselves. Another way to talk about these temptations is to call them “besetting sins”. Every tradition has its own. Among the besetting sins of the Church of England are an over-fondness for ritual and law; a sense of cultural superiority; a disdain for the novel, the unexpected, and the uncivil. Taken on their own each of these things would be trivial, but together they present significant cultural challenges.

Noticing that we have a problem is the first step to overcoming our besetting sins. We finally conquer those sins by learning to tolerate the alternatives. And hopefully conquering in the trivial things helps us to endure when we're faced by the really serious temptations. But it's best to start small. What would happen to us as a community if we were not able to find a skilled musician to accompany our main Sunday worship? How do we react to people walking in part-way through the Gospel reading rather than at the appointed start time? Would we cope with worshipping in a school hall for a while? Some Anglican churches are a lot further on in addressing their besetting sins than we are here; we have a long way to go.

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I began by talking about power and authority, and the ways we fail to give Jesus his due. Our Gospel today is all about power and authority. It describes a possible world - perhaps a probable world! – in the throes of upheaval. It's a deeply troubling picture, which resembles our world in a number of ways. Are we not troubled by news of “wars and insurrections” [Luke 21:9]? Do we not regularly pray for those affected by earthquakes, famines and plagues [v. 11]? What is climate change if not a collection of “dreadful portents and great signs from heaven”?

The part of this picture to which Jesus draws particular attention is the way he expects power dynamics to change. In this possible world, secular and religious authorities are no longer content to serve what is good and true. In such a world the vocation of Christian people will be to testify [v. 13], and perhaps to testify through their deaths [v. 16]. It's difficult to know if we will be ready for this. Jesus encourages us to rely on him to give us what we need at the right time [vv. 14-15]; but with the help of the Holy Spirit we can begin working on the necessary virtues here and now if we desire it.

As I noticed earlier in the week, the Church gives us similar readings every year at about this time. Recently the Church has started calling these weeks between the Feast of All Saints and the beginning of Advent the “Kingdom Season”. Some Anglicans (including many Anglo-Catholics) look down on this change – remember what I said about Anglicans and novelty? Personally I like the Kingdom Season: I feel it's healthy for Churches to be reminded that so many of the things that pass for power and authority are passing; but Jesus is Lord.

Another novelty is that the Christian safeguarding charity thirtyone:eight has been encouraging churches to call this Sunday “Safeguarding Sunday”. Because of where it falls in the Church's year it will always include readings about the collapse of old certainties, and the challenge of remaining faithful when faith becomes uncomfortable. I see the language of safeguarding as just another way of retelling an old truth: that when the Church courts fame and numbers and money and the alignment with secular power it will inevitably overlook and abuse vulnerable people, the people who can give us none of those worldly goods. But as the Christians of Rome famously declared once, the poor are the Church's treasure. And the same goes anyone on the edge: the sick; travellers; refugees and asylum seekers; prisoners; ethnic and sexual minorities...

All of these groups reflect something of what the Church teaches about power and authority. We

have a Lord who was killed as a criminal, and who has now been given the name that is above every name. We are called to see his face in the faces of all the despised of the world; to whom be glory and dominion in this age and in every age.

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