

# JESUS AND POWER

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MILAN KUNDERA tells the story of a czech politician who gave the czech leader his hat to keep him warm during the victory celebrations in 1948. When the politician was purged at a later date, his image was brushed out of the photographs recording this event. However, the photographs continued to show the czech leader wearing the hat.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of this article is power, and power as a negative force. The last resort of power is to annihilate both the person and the way a person is remembered. The first it can do with ease, the second is more difficult. The hat remains to trigger the memory. Other moves which power makes are possessive ones with regard to both persons and things. Power is demonic to the extent that it tries to possess people by taking over their identities. It is grasping and acquisitive when it attempts to accumulate possessions as projections of the self.

Power then can be seen to be active at the level of identity. Power tries to annihilate a person's identity by taking over the person or in the last resort killing the person. Power is attractive and people have a drive towards it: its attractiveness is often embodied in possessions which themselves function as a cipher for personal identity.

In this article I would like to explore the way the gospels present Jesus confronting these aspects of power. His conflict with Satan and the demons, his attitude to possessions and wealth, his teaching on discipleship and his reaction to political power all cohere round the theme of identity. I shall try to develop each area of discussion from that point of view.

## *a) How does Jesus respond to the demons and Satan?*

Characteristic of the response to the exorcizing ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is the phrase: 'What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him'. This authority (*exousia*) or power is thrown into relief

precisely because of the sense of powerlessness experienced by people living in a world dominated by demons. The idea of possession carries with it the understanding of the suppression of the real identity of the person possessed. For this reason, a standard feature of exorcism stories in the gospel is the attempt to gain control of Jesus by naming him, by declaring his identity: 'I know who you are, the Holy One of God' (Mk 1,24). In the markan framework, it might be intriguing to speculate that this 'naming' does not work because the demons do not know the full identity of Jesus which can only be spoken in the perception of his powerlessness (Mk 15,39).

In the Q account of the temptations of Jesus, we can see a similar dynamic at work. If we take them in the matthean presentation, the first two temptations play on the relationship between identity and power. 'If you are the Son of God . . .' is the way in which Satan subtly insinuates doubt about the identity which Jesus has just received at his baptism. When Satan challenges Jesus to turn the stones into bread, he is saying, 'Why don't you satisfy this simple need—you can do it, if you are the Son of God'. What is being tested here is *trust*—trust that God will give us our daily bread. This is putting it in terms of the Lord's Prayer, which may well be justified here, if we look at the phrase, '. . . but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God'. This refers back to the one word that we know Jesus has heard: his naming as Son and his complementary understanding of God as Father. The second temptation is at the other end of the spectrum: 'So you trust God; but how much do you really trust him?' But to throw oneself off the pinnacle of the temple would not be trust. It would be a *demand* that God intervene for me, and I cannot demand God's specific intervention, I can only trust that he will give me what I need. The third temptation does not use the name, Son of God, and the reason is that to accept the offer of all the kingdoms of the world would be to demand a switch of Jesus's central allegiance. It would be a rejection of the name with which he has just been named. So from the heart of his understanding of his identity as Son, Jesus rejects power and wealth and affirms a trust in God as Father—a trust which neither gives up on him nor expects too much from him.

*b) How does Jesus respond to those with possessions?*

The complementary rejection of power and wealth and

affirmation of trust in God is also characteristic of the way Jesus speaks about possessions. The most obvious example where this becomes an issue is in the story of the rich young man (Mt 19,16-22) which concludes:

Jesus said to him, 'If you will be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me'. When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

This story is a mirror image of the third temptation, and here the possessions prevent the young man from throwing in his lot with Jesus. The 'come, follow me' does not speak loudly enough to overcome the competing attraction of the great possessions. He cannot imagine himself without them, he would not be himself without them. There is also a failure of nerve, a failure to trust and this is what creates the sorrow as he walks away. As we can see, the issues of possessions and discipleship intertwine in this story, as they do elsewhere, but for the moment I would like to keep them separate.

It is Luke most of all who has taken up the question of riches and possessions in Jesus's teaching and drawn out its implications.<sup>2</sup> Jesus's attitude to riches and possessions is expounded programmatically in the Beatitudes in prophetic reversal sayings: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6,20). 'But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation' (Lk 6,24). This programme of reversal is expressed pictorially in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16,19-31). In the first part of the parable, the gate has an analogous role to that of the great gulf in the second part of the parable: it is a division between the rich man and the poor man which is not crossed. The difference is that the gate is a dividing line which can be crossed; the rich man, however, makes no attempt to cross it. Indeed the parable gives no hint that he even sees Lazarus there. It is only when the erstwhile rich man is in need himself that he recognizes and names Lazarus. He confers an identity on Lazarus at the point where, stripped of his own riches, he comes face to face with his own identity.

A similar dynamic is evident in the parable of the Rich Fool (Lk 12,16-21). The key element in the parable is the shift of name. In the beginning the protagonist is called uncontroversially 'a rich

man', while at the end of the parable he is named 'fool' by God. This re-naming is the result of the rich man's attitude towards his possessions. His internal debate with himself never breaks through the horizon imposed by his possessions, which he clearly views as the insurance for and the assurance of who he is: 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years' (12,19). But the ample goods are not determinative of his identity, because as his life is claimed, they fall away from him, and their ownership becomes a matter for idle speculation: 'The things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (16,20).

This parable was introduced by the warning: 'Take heed and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (12,15). The parable then was an illustration of this warning, but after the parable Jesus gives positive teaching on possessions, using the images of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field to illustrate this saying: 'For life is more than food and the body more than clothing' (12,23). The whole section stands under the rubric of anxiety. Anxiety is the opposite of trust, and whereas trust is the dimension in which we discover our identity in God, anxiety is that which threatens this identity. The attitude to possessions is the area in which the tension between trust and anxiety is played out. 'Being rich toward God' (12,21) is re-expressed in 12,31 in terms of seeking the kingdom. But a life of trust rather than of anxiety rests on an understanding of God's plan: 'Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' (12,32). This saying which is special to Luke is followed by another exclusively lucan saying which expounds the implications of this trust: 'Sell your possessions and give alms'. The contrast between this imperative and the behaviour of the rich fool is clear. He kept his possessions for himself only, while the disciples are asked to divest themselves of their possessions and use them creatively in almsgiving. This section concludes with another version of 'being rich toward God': 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15,11-32) also illustrates this dynamic. The younger son believes that he has an identity as long as he has money. When he has no money, he perceives himself to have no life and no name, and indeed in Jewish law he has forfeited his name. Consequently, he has to fashion an alternative life for himself and an alternative name from the depths of his poverty. He formulates that name as 'servant', because he sees

no other economic base from which to live his life. However the great moment of the parable is when the Father proclaims him by action and word 'my son'. Meanwhile, the elder brother's vision is clouded by his focus on the money question. His perception is so blinkered that he cannot participate in the renaming of the prodigal. He recognizes that his father has done it, but refuses to do so himself. With withering contempt the brother says 'This son of yours . . .'

For a final example in this section, we can look at the parable of the Wicked Tenants. The perspective which dominates this story is the role of the authorized representative, the *shaliach*, the one who comes in the role of the owner of the vineyard. Opposed to him in the story is the desire for possession of this piece of property. The mechanism for the transfer of ownership is to have one's own name identified with the property. In order for that to come about, the identity of the claimant (the heir) must be annihilated: 'This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours' (20,14). This claim does not make much sense to the contemporary reader, and there may be something in palestinian legal customs which could explain it. Nevertheless, it is clear that taking possession of the vineyard and putting one's own name on it is inadequate to the situation. It is not enough: the owner of the vineyard comes and destroys them. It is totally short-sighted to equate identity with possessions and power.

*c) How does Jesus respond to the disciples' drive to power?*

'Get behind me Satan. For you are not on the side of God, but of man' (Mk 8,33). Peter's rejection of Jesus's suffering identity brings forth this harsh response. The last sentence of the previous section can be seen as a secular translation of this saying. It is totally short-sighted (not to say non-christian) to equate identity with possessions and power. It is non-christian, because Jesus spells out in no uncertain terms the principle 'as Christ, so the Christian':

If anyone would come after me, that person must deny self, take up the cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save their life, will lose it; and whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Discipleship is a renaming of myself by a process of identifying with the person I am called to follow. Fundamentally that means

developing a sense of trust in the God who has named Jesus as Son. Interestingly enough, Matthew uses the same phrase, 'Get behind me Satan' in his account of the third temptation—the temptation to easy power and riches (Mt 4,10).

The conflict then is between the understanding of Jesus's messiahship as one of suffering or as one of power. Mark leaves us in no doubt as to where he stands. In the central section of his gospel (8,22-10,52), he presents Jesus as instructing the disciples three times about the suffering dimension of the Son of Man. Each of these instructions is associated with a misunderstanding on the part of the disciples and is followed by teaching on discipleship. We have just been considering the first misunderstanding, and it would not be out of character with Mark's portrayal of Peter if we were to infer that Peter's concern was less for the Lord than for what it would mean for himself and the other apostles.

After the second prediction of the Passion (9,31), Jesus asks the disciples what they were talking about on the 'way' (a markan discipleship word). An embarrassed silence comes upon them, because what they had been discussing was which one of them was the greatest. Jesus sits down—the formal position of teaching—and tells them: 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all'.

After the third prediction of the Passion (Mk 10,33-34), James and John come to ask him for positions of authority in his kingdom. It is not that they have superior spiritual insight here, they are trying to steal a march on the other disciples who become absolutely furious when they hear what James and John are up to. Again Jesus has to teach them:

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (10,42-45).

The fundamental problem of the disciples here is that they do not understand who Jesus is. Because they fail to grasp the identity of Jesus, they cannot understand who they are. Within the structure of Mark's gospel, the disciples are the insiders, the ones in the know, who try to preserve power for themselves: 'John said to

him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he was not following us" (Mk 9,38). Jesus's rebuke to them shows that the power of Jesus's name is not something to be reserved for a privileged few, but that it is alive amongst people who are apparently outsiders. In fact the apparent outsiders often have more insight into the identity of Jesus than the disciples.

The beautiful story of the anointing at Bethany in Mark 14,3-9 is the classic example of this. An unnamed woman appears from out of the blue to anoint Jesus. The bystanders grumble about how the money which has been wasted on this ointment might have been distributed to help the poor. Jesus defends the woman and adds the unprecedented remark that wherever the gospel is preached, what she has done will be told in memory of her. What has happened here is that this anonymous woman has perceived the passion identity of Jesus as the poor suffering just one, and while she cannot prevent that happening to Jesus, she anoints him as both king in his death (a theme developed by Mark in chapter 15) and as the needy corpse. Jesus is the poor one oppressed by the authorities (Mk 14,1-2) and betrayed by his friend (14,10-11). To perceive that it is in his powerlessness that he is king is the motive for the action of the unnamed woman who is then herself given an identity by this action.

*d) How does Jesus respond to the exercise of political power?*

Throughout the gospel, people have been trying to name Jesus. The demons start it off, they seek to disempower him by naming him. His own townspeople also try to name him, by his relationships to people they know: 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, are not his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him'. Later on in the same chapter, Herod enters the scene; 'Jesus's name had become known' and people are trying to rename him: he is John the Baptist raised from the dead; he is Elijah or he is a prophet like one of the prophets of old. In the face of someone different, we must domesticate him or her in some way or another. Put a name on him, tame her, imprison him with your own categories, do not let her live.

It should come as no surprise that the accounts of Jesus's trial revolve around the question of Jesus's identity. After conflicting evidence in the trial in Mark, the High Priest stops beating around

the bush and demands, 'Are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed?' And Jesus said, 'I am; and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven'. As long as Jesus allows others to put a name on him, he is allowed to remain alive; as soon as he names himself, he must die.

You can effectively kill persons by taking their name from them; you give them a number or another person's name: then their existence can be tolerated. As soon as a person claims his or her own name, that person must die. In the synoptic gospels Jesus says virtually nothing at his trial. He only names himself, and answers the question of Pilate 'Are you the King of the Jews?' by saying 'You have said it'. In the face of the combined power structure of Jerusalem priesthood and roman governor, Jesus simply claims his own name. In a way it does not seem much, but at the same time it speaks volumes. *Let me be who I am* is the cry of every oppressed person. I am not someone who can be tidied away into one of your files; I am not someone whose name can even be removed from the files. But the oppressor cannot allow a person to claim his or her own identity, and the passion of Jesus runs its course; he must die and he does die. But the great paradox of the markan account in particular is that it is precisely in this stifling of Jesus's identity that this identity comes to the fore. The very things he had been teaching his disciples, the very thing which the woman perceived are highlighted through the cross. Jesus is the king, and finally in the words of the one who knows nothing, the total outsider who is the centurion, he looks at the broken abandoned body of Jesus on the cross and proclaims him Son of God, the very identity his death was supposed to suppress.

There is also a fundamentally community thrust in Jesus's attitude to power. In the first place, those who are possessed, or, if we want to express it differently, those who are oppressed to the point of losing their identity are liberated. They are freed to claim their identity and be restored to the community, to build the community. The assault on possessions demands an understanding that possessions are not to be identified with self in either crude or subtle ways. Riches are part of the wealth of God's people, and only when that is really true do they cease to become possessions which become a substitute for the identity of their owner.

Discipleship in the end is the context where the identity claimed by Jesus is remembered and not forgotten. One dimension of the



proclamation of the resurrection is that Jesus's claiming of his identity on the cross *cannot* be forgotten. As the Last Supper anticipates, the community is formed precisely through the death of Jesus, since his death would have no meaning unless it was remembered. 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. In the tradition of our faith and practice then, we celebrate the memory of that death; it must be seen as a prophetic celebration which challenges power with the memory of Jesus's death, the sharing of what we have, and a commitment to free those whose identity is on the point of extinction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kundera, Milan: *The book of laughter and forgetting*.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Luke T.: *The literary function of possessions in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 39 (Scholars Press, Missoula, 1977).