

March 29, 2026—Palm Sunday
The Rev. James Wyatt

Power

What do you think of when you hear the word “power”?

We all know that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” right? But I also think we would all agree that few things feel worse than feeling powerless, like we are trapped in a situation where we lack the strength required to make any kind of change.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about my own relationship with power. After I went to the opening of the Recovery Café, I spent some time reflecting on how it felt to talk to a state representative and a couple of members of the city council, and whether I maybe enjoyed that brush with (very small-time) power a little too much. But what I realized, eventually, is that the whole reason I was there was because of the way this church uses its power on behalf of the powerless. And all my interactions with people who claim some measure of political power in this city and this state were to encourage them to continue using that power for the same purpose—to help people who are less powerful.

Along similar lines, I’ve been thinking about the power of the Episcopal church—the church that claims 11 U.S. presidents and 34 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, which historically has been very cozy in its coexistence with earthly power. Last July, Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe wrote an editorial for the Religion News Service that highlighted his understanding of how the church needs to view our faith not “as a tool of dominion” but rather as “a promise of liberation.” He wrote, “Churches like ours, protected by the First Amendment and practiced in galvanizing people of goodwill, may be some of the last institutions capable of resisting this administration’s overreach and recklessness... God calls us to place the most vulnerable and marginalized at the center of our common life, and we must follow that command regardless of the dictates of any political party or earthly power.”¹

I feel like Palm Sunday and our readings this morning are fundamentally all about how we understand that word, power—and how we understand ourselves, as Christians, and our call to use or set aside the power we have.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, in a speech given to striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, said that “power, properly understood, is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change.” We all have some amount of power. And that, in itself, is not a bad thing. The question is what we do with it.

The prophet Zechariah had a vision of a future king, “triumphant and victorious,” but also “humble and riding on a donkey,” who would use his power to bring an end to war, to “command peace to the nations,” and to establish “his dominion” over all the known world. This is a king who is willing to exert power over others—dominion—for a good purpose, the establishment of peace among the nations. He is sort of a benevolent dictator—which is certainly better than most dictators, but still represents a lot of power concentrated in one person and exerted downward, to control and dominate, rather than to liberate and empower others.

So Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew seems to be quite deliberately echoing these words from Zechariah. Matthew tells us that Jesus sent his disciples to fetch a donkey and her colt “to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet.” And the “very large crowd” greeted his triumphant entry by quoting Psalm 118 and calling him “the son of David,” and spreading their cloaks in his path as if he was the king that Zechariah talked about.

And if Zechariah and Matthew 21 were our only readings this morning, it might be pretty easy to imagine that’s exactly who Jesus was. A benevolent dictator, willing to exert power

¹ <https://religionnews.com/2025/07/03/once-the-church-of-presidents-the-episcopal-church-must-now-be-an-engine-of-resistance/>

over others for a good purpose. And when we speak of God as “all-powerful” or “omnipotent” or “almighty”—and our Book of Common Prayer uses “almighty” a *lot*—I wonder if that’s what we imagine God is like. A benevolent dictator who could, if God wanted to, make us all do exactly what God wants us to do.

But our reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians paints a very different picture of power. “Let the same mind be in you,” Paul writes, “that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” In other words, Jesus was every bit as “almighty” as God is, but he knew better than to exploit or abuse that power. Instead, he “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And ... humbled himself...” Paul exhorts the church in Philippi to model their own lives after the humility and self-emptying of Christ.

Now, here’s the thing about this passage. Looking at the history of Christianity, tyrants and slave-owners and abusers have loved passages like these verses from Philippians, where Paul seems to encourage a sort of meek submission and obedience that lets other people walk all over you. And if you read Paul’s words here as if they’re directed to us *as individuals*, that’s a reasonable reading. But Paul wasn’t writing to individuals. The word “you” throughout this passage is plural—he’s talking to “you all.” He was writing to a *community*, outlining what he thought the behavior of the community should be toward its own members. A dictator who takes power and exerts it downward, a tyrant who tries to make everyone cater to his needs instead of their own, is not behaving as a part of that community. A slave-owner who encourages people to emulate Christ’s obedience when he came “in the form of a slave,” is not behaving as part of that community. And an abuser urging his wife to obedience to the point of death is also not behaving as part of that community. Paul’s advice here works only if it’s adopted by the whole community, creating a place where it’s safe to look out for the needs of others because you can trust that others are looking out for your needs, too, and no one’s going to walk all over you or keep you in subjugation or subject you to abuse. His advice doesn’t work in isolation, as if he was writing just to a *singular* you or just to me. He was writing to *us*, and encouraging us *as a community* to let the mind of Christ be in us, to transform our community according to the model of Christ.

When we do that, we discover a different kind of power. We discover the power within us, the power of our collective action and service. That kind of power isn’t exerted downward to subjugate or dominate others, but inward to form and strengthen the bonds between us, to create resilience and endurance and inner strength. And it’s exerted outward and upward to achieve our common purpose, and in the words of Doctor King, “to bring about social, political, and economic change.”

Tyrants and dictators believe that power is a limited resource to be hoarded and consolidated. They wield their power primarily to help themselves hold on to power, and with that in mind, to prevent others from claiming power. That’s why one of the tools they use is sowing division—it’s to prevent us, their subjects, from claiming the power that is ours, the power that binds us together and makes us strong enough to resist them. They do everything they can to make us suspicious of each other, to nurture fear and even hatred of “the other.” Because they know that the greatest power we have is loving each other.

When we come together in a community where everyone is looking out for everyone else’s needs, where we humble ourselves to each other and serve each other and see the face of Christ in each other, then we won’t let anyone be exploited or enslaved or abused. A community built on that mutual love is powerful enough to resist tyrants, powerful enough to achieve our common purpose in service to the common good, powerful enough to bring about political, social, and economic change. A community like that is a glimpse of heaven, a glimpse of life in a kingdom built on a very different kind of power, ruled by a very different kind of king.

Power in the form of domination, power exerted downward, is easy to see and recognize. Power in the form of community, power exerted inward and outward and upward, is less easy to see. The crowds in Jerusalem responded to Jesus when they saw triumphant, dominant power, and they turned on him quickly when that power was stripped away. No

doubt the dominant powers—embodied in Pilate and the chief priests and elders of Judea—had a hand in that, trying to squash Jesus' power before it became a threat to them.

This week we call Holy is all about how worldly power, the power of domination and oppression, tried to suppress the power of God—the power of community and humility and mutual service and love. And this week is holy because we know that ultimately oppressive power fails and the power of love and community and mutual service is exalted.

May the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.