

University Sermon, 21st October 2018

University Church of St Mary the Virgin, University of Oxford

Delivered by Imam Monawar Hussain

In the name of God, the Infinitely Good, the Most Merciful

May I begin by thanking the Vice-Chancellor for the kind invitation to deliver this University Sermon and to the University Church, especially The Revd William Lamb and his team. Thank you for having me. I have visited the University Church on many occasions and we have often met in the Old Library upstairs, bringing together under the auspices of the Oxford Council of Faiths, and hosted by the Revd Charlotte Bannister-Parker, the rich diversity of faiths in our city. We are fortunate in our beautiful city and our country, that so many give their valuable time, energy and personal resource, reaching out to each other across faiths and cultures, to build genuine friendships rooted in love and understanding.

The reading from Mark's gospel [10:35-45] today is profound and pertinent to recent events that we have been witnessing – both nationally and internationally. When Jesus, upon him be peace, speaks of the rulers of gentiles lording power over their subjects, his disciples and audience, will have recognised the model of power he was referring to. This is not a 21st century liberal democracy, where on the whole we do have mechanisms through which we can hold those who exercise power to account and peaceably remove

them from office, through the ballot box, if we so wish. However, in Mark's context access to power was limited to those of 'wealth, family origins, and occupation' and the 'exercise of power' was such that it was to the detriment of the vast majority of the population but to the benefit of the ruler or the ruling class. The use of violence was the norm, in the words of Wilkes, 'Roman examples ranged from forcing Jews to carry their gear for a mile to lining the roadways with crucified victims.'¹ This was rule through fear, brute force and sheer physical domination of the subjects.

What is striking is that over 2,000 years later, we continue to witness and experience oppressive forms of power, some naked, such as the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi Journalist, writing for The Washington Post, who entered the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul on 2nd October 2018, never to be seen again. We have seen the images and have been drip-fed, horrific details of what might have happened to him. The details are ghastly and it seems he was murdered in the most unimaginable manner, possibly to send a signal to others who simply advocate, what we in our country take for granted - press freedom, rule of law, and democracy. We hold him, his family and friends in our prayers this morning.

Other, both subtle and coercive forms of power, equally destructive and damaging, have been highlighted this week. For example, Dame Laura Cox's, independent inquiry into

¹ Bill Thompson, 'Servant, Leader, or Both? A Fresh Look at Mark 10:35-45', in The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership,' Fall 2015, Vol. 9 (2), pp.54-65.

'Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff'², the case of the Huddersfield grooming gang and their horrific sexual exploitation of vulnerable children, and the statistics highlighting the worrying rise in hate crime. My point is that where there is a relationship of power, its exercise can lead to a 'lording over others' that diminishes the individual's, as well as our collective human dignity. There is one other form of contemporary power, which did not exist at Jesus' time but that is being used by individuals, groups and nation states, to undermine our state institutions, democracy and societal cohesiveness. This is e-technology, which opens up extraordinary opportunities through creating virtual worlds of mutual interest, without walls or barriers, and the possibilities of building friendships with people, one would never otherwise, have met. The flip side to this is that the proliferation of e-media, giving birth to social media platforms and satellite channels, has given the ability to those who were incapable in the past of delivering their narratives of hate and violence to the masses, the ability to do so, to our collective detriment. The young people, primarily from Muslim backgrounds but not exclusively, I support through The Oxford Foundation, who are often disengaged with education, are accessing online content specifically designed to lure them into violent extremism. Their passion for change is manipulated and often poisoned, with what I term a theology of separateness, that isolates them from their own families and the wider community. At one point, I was informed that the so called 'IS' were uploading 40,000 videos a day, all very well edited, slick, and targeting young vulnerable Muslims. The violent acts of this group of terrorists, whose victims are often overwhelmingly Muslim, is

² <https://www.cloisters.com/images/Bullying-Harassment-HOC-Staff-Oct-2018.pdf> [accessed 20th October 2018]

then used by the far-right to create a narrative of hate, that maligns the whole Muslim community, as a result of which, as the Home Office figures report this week, religious hate crime has risen by 40% in England and Wales. Half of the victims are Muslims, followed by people of Jewish faith.³ Over the last few weeks, I have spoken with a number of prominent Jewish leaders and there is an overall sense that the rise of Anti-Semitism is causing real concern and anxiety in the British Jewish community. It is therefore imperative that we stand together united against those who are poisoning young minds with Anti-Semitic tropes and using e-media to spread their hate against the British Jewish community.

So, what can we as Christians and Muslims learn from our traditions about, and the exercise of power?

Here, I think we have an important meeting point for both Christians and Muslims. First, Jesus, upon him be peace, radically redefines greatness and in effect, power. To be great and powerful, is to serve others. He turns the Roman hierarchical model of power upside down. Power lies in the service of God's creation. It helps break the idol of excessive pride, it cultivates and nurtures, humility. A companion of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessings be Upon Him (pbuh), asked him, 'What kind of Islam is best?' The Prophet (pbuh) replied, 'That you serve food and give salutation of peace to the one whom you know and the one whom you do not know.' [Bukhari] He also said, 'The best of people are those that bring most benefit to the rest of

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/uk-hate-crime-religious-muslims-islamophobia-police-racism-a8585846.html> [accessed 20th October 2018]

humankind.’ [Daraqutni, *Hasan*]. ‘If someone spends the night satiated while the neighbour is hungry, he has not believed in me.’ [al-Hakim and al-Mustadrak]. The Prophet was asked, “What actions are most excellent?’ he replied, ‘To gladden the heart of human beings, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the sufferings of the injured.” [Bukhari]

Let me cite an example, from my own work and that I hope might resonate with some of you. It relates to the field of education. A school in inner city Birmingham invited me to help implement my educational programme at their school. This was a secondary school but one in which most of the student population came from a Pakistani-Bengali heritage. Having toured the school, I met members of staff and a group of 6th form students. One of the students said something that has been etched on mind ever since. He said something to the effect that, ‘this is my bubble’, meaning the inner-city area and that ‘I was born here, will die here and there’s no way I can escape this.’ I came away thinking how might I use my network of contacts to burst this bubble, for this student and his fellows? Following an email introduction by a friend, we were able to establish a partnership exchange programme between the Birmingham school and Atlantic College, in Wales. This opened up the possibility of the young people from Birmingham, meeting other young people from some 90 different countries! The international students, had the reciprocal opportunity to experience life in Birmingham first-hand. Atlantic College also extended a scholarship for a student from Birmingham, thus far 3 students have studied under the scholarship programme. As educators or

whatever field of our specialty, our form of service should be to open up new possibilities for those seeking to burst through the bubbles of social and economic disadvantage.

The servanthood model is rooted in and nourished by Jesus' two commandments found in Mark, 12:29-31 and these were also the basis of the seminal document called *A Common Word*, initiated by the world's leading Muslim authorities, representing all the major strands of the Islamic global community. These commandments, that we as the children of Abraham share, are to Love God and to Love our Neighbour, and to do so with our heart, our soul, our very being.

It is one thing to let this role off our tongues but to what extent are we *really* living these teachings, as Muslims and Christians?