

Reflections on



Power



Lent 2026

Conwy and Prestatyn

Methodist Circuit



<https://www.conwyprestatynmc.org.uk/>

Lent 2026: Reflections on Power

Introduction

In 2021 the Methodist Conference adopted a report on the theology of safeguarding. It included the following words:

‘It is a common misunderstanding that power *per se* is harmful, resulting in a mistrust of those in positions of leadership and authority even if they are exercising power responsibly. Human life and human community depend on the responsible exercise of power by those entrusted with it.

‘All within the Church have power, in the sense of being able to affect each other. The effects which some people’s actions have, can, however, be more significant than those of others. This can be related to their status within the community, the office they hold, the length of time they have been associated with the Church, or because of individual charisma. Power can be expressed and embodied in particular words and actions, or it can be exercised ‘nonactively’, through an atmosphere which supports, or which silences or stifles. There is the power of the ‘majority’ in shaping the ongoing life of the Church. There may be the power of the ‘minority’ when particular strong voices persuade a number of others to undertake a course of action.’

https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2021-27-the-theology-of-safeguarding_NsSFKxd.pdf

pp367-368

This Lent course will draw on the Gospel readings set each Sunday in Lent and reflect on them from the point of view of power: the power others have over us and the power we have on others; the power to do good and the power to do harm.

How to use this course

Each week offers a Bible reading, a reflection, three questions and a prayer. These will be available on videos accessible from the Circuit website as well as in this booklet.

You are encouraged to discuss the content with others – at home, in a café, at a church group, or by joining a Circuit Zoom conversation on Tuesday evenings, 7.30-8.30, from 24 February to 31 March.

James Garnett, February 2026

Week 1: Power to choose

Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Reflection

Whenever we go into a supermarket, it looks as if we, the consumer, are being given the power to choose, doesn't it? So much choice: different flavours, different cultures, different brands.

Yet we can only choose from what is there; and most of what is on the shelves has been manufactured and packaged to appeal to our appetites for sugar and salt, for convenience and cost. Real power lies with the food industry that controls what options are open to us. The shop and its suppliers can exploit our appetite for cheap, tasty, filling food, so that our choices maximise their profit.

The same is true of politics and the media. What we experience as consumer choice is controlled by people who have the power to choose what we can choose. And they too appeal to our appetites to encourage us to think that we are being given what we want: our appetites for scandal and outrage, for security and simplicity.

The Devil that we read of in Matthew's Gospel is a translation of the Greek word *diabolos*. This word means, 'slanderer' or 'mud-thrower', and we read of this manipulative character inviting Jesus to choose food, security and dominion. This is a story about refusing to accept the choices we are presented with – even if they appeal strongly to our natural appetites.

Like ourselves, those with the power to influence us are being driven by their cravings – the desire for power and for wealth is very strong. And like them, we can find ourselves coercing other people in order to get what we want.

It might not always be possible to resist such power. We may not have the physical or mental strength to opt for anything beyond the choices that are presented to us. But we do have the power to

question our natural inclinations, and those who would exploit them. If we come to recognise today's choices for what they are, then tomorrow, we may have the strength to reject the options we are offered and choose for ourselves.

Questions

1. What are the ways that supermarkets try to influence your choices? What other options might be available to you?
2. In the story from Matthew's Gospel, how did the character described as *diabolos* try to influence the choices Jesus made? How did Jesus resist?
3. How can we become more aware of the limited range of choices that we are being presented within a situation? How can we expand the options and exercise our power to choose?

Prayer

Almighty God,
who alone has the power to achieve all things,
help us to notice the power that others exercise over us
so that we can choose wisely;
and help us to notice the power that we exercise over others
so that we may act always in your love,
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Week 2: The power of imagination

Reading: John 3:1-17

Reflection

Our ability to understand and control the natural world has given us a great respect for nature. We use the word, 'Nature' to describe things as they really are – as God made them, we might say; and we assume that it is good to act in accordance with nature.

And yet, one of our human superpowers is the ability to imagine the world differently from how it currently is. In the late nineteenth century, our capacity for imagination brought free education for all children. In the mid-twentieth century, women were given the right to vote. After the second world war, free healthcare was made available to rich and poor alike. Each of these developments challenged what had been assumed to be the natural order of things.

To be sure, not everything we call nature is susceptible to the power of the imagination. Try as we might, imagining a warm and sunny February will not change the orbit of the earth around the sun. But, when Jesus spoke to the Pharisee Nicodemus about being born from above, he was making the point that it is not just the materiality of things that counts. It is the value we place on them, the meaning we give to them, the way we imagine them.

Nicodemus took Jesus very literally and asked how it is possible to go back into the womb and be born again. And it is precisely in Jesus's metaphorical use of language that he highlights the power of imagination. Birth is not just birth. It is all that we value about beginnings, about the possibilities of a new life, about sharing in the genetics of a heavenly Father, who is no more an elderly gentleman in a white robe sitting on a cloud than rebirth is about entering again into our mother's womb.

Imagination, it is true, has the power to delude us, enabling us to take shelter from unwelcome realities. We may imagine ourselves to be more important than we are, or that others are the source of problems we have made for ourselves.

But imagination also has the power to transform the way that we see ourselves and the world around us. We are not slaves to the materiality of our nature or the social conditions into which we are born. We can imagine a better world.

Questions

1. Can you think of some more examples of how imagination has changed the world?
2. In speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus highlighted the role of God's Spirit in being born from above, and said that 'the Spirit blows where it wills.' What do you think this means?
3. What aspects of our current lives can you imagine being reborn from above?

Prayer

Creator God,
who spoke all things into being,
and will bring all things to completion in your kingdom of
compassion,
fire our imaginations with your Spirit,
so that we may share in your great transformation;
and strengthen our courage with your Word,
so that we have the power to act in your love,
through Christ our Lord.
Amen

Week3: The power of influence

Reading - John 4:5-42

Reflection

How we think, what we do, what we say, isn't just about ourselves. What we think and do and say affects what others around us think and do and say. Just as their thoughts and actions and words have an impact on us. Humans are social creatures.

We can see this in the story of Jesus and the woman by the well. At first, his words provoke her. There is a brusqueness in both sides of the conversation that reflects the age-old division between Jew and Samaritan, with all its potential for mutual rejection. And yet, the conversation was transformed by her gracious response to Jesus' rudeness, and his gracious observation that the hour would come when the worship of God would transcend the differences between them. The power of this exchange can be seen not just in the changing attitudes of the woman and Jesus towards each other, but also in her invitation to others in the village to come and meet him too.

Our influence over one another has the power to create division or to build connections. Sometimes this is simply a matter of how people respond to us, and as we become aware of our power to influence others, we may modify our behaviour to shape that response.

Sometimes, though, we set out deliberately to use our power of influence. This can be a positive thing if we form a group to encourage each other towards a shared, life-affirming goal - like Alcoholics Anonymous, for example. But we misuse our power of influence if we try to manipulate people. This happens if our own need for gaining support is more important to us than the other people involved. The negative power of using people as a means to an end is compounded if our purpose in joining together is to inflict harm on someone else.

We do not have a choice about having the power to influence others. Even if we do nothing in response to a situation, that will encourage others also to do nothing. We are, however, able to become aware of the influence we have – to see ourselves as others see us; and we are able, then, to choose how we use our power.

Questions

1. Can you think of examples of people (individuals and groups) who have influenced you?
2. How might the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well have turned out differently if she had responded negatively to him? If he had responded negatively to her?
3. What opportunities do you have at the moment for exercising your power to influence in a positive way? Are there any unhealthy influences on your life that you need to address?

Prayer

Life-giving God,
we give you thanks that where there is life there is power,
and we praise you for the desire you have given us
to use our power for each other's good.
Help us to see ourselves as you see us,
and to notice the influence we have
for good and for harm.
Guide us, as we seek to walk
in the footsteps of Jesus Christ,
our Lord and friend.
Amen

Week 4: The power of community

Reading: John 9:1-41

Reflection

Power is magnified in the hands of a community and those who represent it. A community acts as one person on behalf of many: it has the power to include or exclude, to impose conformity but also to offer protection.

John's Gospel bears the scars of a conflict between two communities in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. In the absence of the Temple, the Jewish religion continued to worship Yahweh through the scriptures – taught by rabbis and influenced by the piety of the Pharisees. The Christian religion worshipped Jesus as Yahweh's Messiah, drawing followers both from the Hebrew tradition and beyond it.

The story of the man blind from birth is a parable for this conflict. In it, the Pharisees represent the community that has handed down the traditions of Moses from one generation to the next. They are acting to protect the integrity of that tradition from those who claimed a competing authority from God (in which Jesus was not alone) – especially when new ideas challenged the practices of the community, such as keeping the Sabbath.

One of the challenges of living as part of a community is to balance the interests of individuals with the interests of the community as a whole. The man born blind is an example of how this balancing act can go wrong, of a community putting its own needs ahead of those of its members: the man is excluded from the synagogue because his encounter with Christ was seen as a threat to the Law of Moses, rather than as a fulfilment of it.

Balancing acts cannot be resolved once and for all: maintaining balance is a continual process of monitoring and adjustment. So it is

still for every community – whether a family, a nation or a church. Those who are given authority by a community to act on its behalf exercise not just their own power, but that of the people they represent. Although our attention is often captured by the misuse of authority, this power is fundamental in enabling individuals to flourish in the company of others and to protect them from harm.

Questions

1. Can you think of examples of how the authority given to an individual by a community has brought benefits? Can you think of examples of where it has caused harm?
2. If you were a friend of the man born blind, how might you have tried to persuade the Pharisees to keep him within the fellowship of the Synagogue?
3. Think of communities you belong to (including the church). How do they balance the needs of individuals with the needs of the group as a whole? What works well? What doesn't?

Prayer

God of All – Father, Son and Spirit –
we give you thanks for drawing us together in communities
and for raising up leaders to guide and direct us.
May they have the wisdom to discern your way,
the courage to follow that way in the face of opposition
and the humility to know when they have gone astray,
for the sake of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.
Amen

Week 5: The power of compassion

Reading: John 11:1-45

Reflection

Compassion is a word for love that avoids the romantic associations we have with 'love', while expressing the strength of fellow-feeling we can have for others. Compassion has power because it isn't just a feeling, it suggests an obligation to act. Yet perhaps there is something lacking too: we have compassion *for* someone; but love is more complete – it is the person in all that they are that we love. This manifestation of power is complicated and hard to explain. We need story and symbol to grasp its hold on us.

The story we find in John Chapter 11 makes great play of Jesus choosing not to heal Lazarus. When told that the one he loved was sick, the Greek word translated as love is *phileo* – suggesting the love of friendship. Later on, the bystanders, seeing Jesus' distress, commented on his love of Lazarus – *phileo* again – and wondered why he had not healed his friend.

The story makes clear that Jesus resisted the social expectation that he would act out of friendship to heal Lazarus – and implies that he resisted his own inclinations too. He did so because he loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus with a love that in verse 5 is expressed using the Greek word *agape*. He *cared* for them; and cared to the extent that he did not want simply to make Lazarus better again. He wanted to reveal to them the full extent of the care in which God holds us and in which we are capable of holding each other.

When Jesus saw Lazarus' tomb he was deeply moved and troubled. The Greek word *tarasso* literally means 'put in motion;' and Jesus was set in motion to summon Lazarus from the tomb and shake off the bindings of death. (The Greek word translated as 'resurrection', *anastasis*, literally means to stand again.) It was not the *phileo* of friendship that caused him to weep (the crowd is always mistaken in

stories about Jesus). It was the *agape* of fellow-feeling, combining remorse for having allowed his friends to suffer the misery of their brother's death with an awareness that raising Lazarus would not only reveal a deeper love, but would also foreshadow – and possibly even hasten – his own *agape*-fuelled fate.

Here we have a parable for the power of compassion. Such is the motivating power of this form of love that it enables us to overcome our own immediate instincts (even the desire to save a friend). Such is the power of compassion that it enables us to withstand social pressure and risk the disappointment or ridicule from our community. Such is the power of compassion that we choose to lay aside these immediate pressures for the sake of a deeper care for the people we love.

Alongside Mary and Martha, we learn that illness and suffering of every kind will continue to disturb the comfort and stability of our lives. But compassion will sustain us and set us back on our feet again. Such is the power of compassion that it will overcome even death.



Questions

1. Can you think of examples of when you, or people you know, have set aside immediate desires for the sake of compassion?
2. The English word 'love' translates four Greek words (two of which we have met in this passage). The Greek word '*tarasso*' ('troubled' in English) is used for 46 Hebrew words in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Being 'troubled' had wide and significant connotations. Can you think of other examples of Jesus being troubled and what it led to?
3. Where is compassion needed most today? How powerful would compassion need to be in order to overcome other forms of power?

Prayer

God of Love,
thank you for revealing to us,
in the life, death and resurrection of Christ,
the power of compassion.
Stir our hearts with your Spirit of love,
to direct the goals we set and the choices we make,
so that, with you, we may overcome
the powers of greed, exploitation and self-interest
that bring suffering and death to so many.
We stand with Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Week 6: The power of hope

Reading: John 12:12-19

Reflection

We have become accustomed to thinking that we make good decisions about the future when we understand the reality of our present day and the facts of history that led up to it. Yet the questions that we ask about today and the stories we tell about yesterday are influenced by what we hope for in the future. Hope has the power to shape who we are on the basis of what we would like to become.

In John's account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we are offered four interpretations of the event from different groups of people. The crowd at large welcomed Jesus as King of Israel, using words drawn from Psalm 118. The narration also links these events with Zechariah's prophecy of Jerusalem's restoration following the exile to Babylon, words written some 600 years earlier. The people shared in generations of hope for a successor to King David who would make Israel great again – and this is how they responded to Jesus.

Amongst the crowd were those who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus from the dead or who had come to see Jesus because they had heard of this wondrous sign (as John calls it). Maybe some hoped for further spectacle to divert and entertain them. Maybe some hoped that their lives might also be transformed by a miracle.

The Pharisees are cast by John as the enemies of Jesus. From them we hear fear rather than hope – fear that that this crowd was part of a trend, and that the whole world would soon be following Jesus. This would pose a threat to the established order and their attempts to preserve the traditions of their ancestors – an unwelcome vision of the future that was to guide their response to the present.

Finally, we are told that the disciples did not understand the events at first. Only when Jesus had been glorified by rising from the dead did they come to understand the chaotic triumph of that entry into Jerusalem in its proper context. Then, with hope fixed on a future in which love prevails over death, they were able to look back on the misplaced hopes for a king, for healing, for religion.

What we hope for matters. What we do with facts about climate change depends on whether we hope for a continuation of our consumer-led present, or a future in which compassion prevails. What we do with facts about displaced people depends on whether we hope for a future of national isolation or a future in which compassion prevails. What we do with facts about poverty and addiction depends on whether we hope for a future of wealth and pleasure or one in which compassion prevails.

What we hope for matters because hope brings the power to shape, not just the future, but also our choices in the present and our recollections of the past. Where we place our hope is not a matter of knowledge – about how the world works or about where we have come from. It is a matter of faith. And faith is not just a matter of knowledge about Jesus. It is a matter of believing him, of having faith in him, when he gives us the commandment to love each other – to care for each and have compassion for each other with *agape* love.

In concluding these reflections on power, the words of St Paul to the church in Corinth come to mind. These words come from a context in which members of this early church were seeking to gain power over one another with competing spiritual gifts, and in which fledgling groups of Christ-followers were subject to the power of Rome to impose conformity.

‘And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.’

1 Corinthians 13:13

Questions

1. Can you think of examples in your life or the life of our nation when hope for the future has shaped understanding of the past and a response to the present?
2. For the people welcoming Jesus, Jerusalem with its Temple was a symbol for the hope that the land of Judah would subdue its enemies (including Rome) and live in peace under the protection of Yahweh. For us, reading this as 21st Century Christians, what hope does Jerusalem represent?
3. What signs of hope can you see that sustain our faith by pointing towards God's kingdom of compassion?

Prayer

God of the past, the present and the future,
in whose eternal life of love
we find the purpose that brings joy to our living,
sustain in us the hope of your kingdom
so that we may have the strength
to resist all that would distract us from your way,
and use all that is in our power
in witnessing to the power of your love
to bring justice, grace and peace.
For the glory of Christ – crucified and risen.
Amen