

Dear Friends,

We have a strange reaction to people in power and their systems. If we have directly suffered at their hands we have a natural revulsion and desire for revenge. We will be only too aware of how they use their systems to line their own pockets and ensure their control over anyone who challenges them. If we have been reasonably comfortable under the same systems, we will tend to defend them and even revel in the supposed glory of the worlds they have created. We commend the Roman Empire for its organization and engineering triumphs, forgetting that this came at the cost of a ruthless destruction of their civilizations and a vast system of slavery in support of the few. We even color that ruthlessness with a pretense of virtue: for example, David Livingstone, the famous Scottish physician and missionary, one of the great heroes of British nineteenth-century history, sought the spread of British Empire in Africa under the headings of “Christianity, commerce and civilization.” Many people, then and since, have turned a blind eye to the violent means the empire used to achieve and maintain its control.

Such practices are in no way a monopoly of the past. The Russian and Chinese governments operate to a similar pattern today and do some others, whether in Asia, the Middle East, Africa or South America. As the adage warns us: those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it.

Jesus came into confrontation with both the civil and religious authorities of his day. He was to end his time on earth by being put to death by the civil authorities, but most of his arguments were with the religious authorities. The scribes and Pharisees were not necessarily the hardliners they sometimes appear to be in the Gospels, but what Jesus objected to in them was their hypocrisy and abuse of power. St. Matthew’s Gospel draws together the teaching of Jesus into five substantial sermons, which can be connected to the five feasts of Judaism. He is writing for an audience of Jewish converts to Christianity and so wants to highlight the relationship between the world his listeners grew up in and difference introduced by Jesus.

In the words of the nineteenth-century Catholic historian and politician Lord Acton, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” What happens in any organization, whether civil or religious, is a tendency to turn inspiration into dictatorship. Underlying the teaching of Jesus is his desire to free us from such patterns in our own lives and also in the systems that surround us. He does this by revealing the true meaning of God’s relationship with God’s people and encouraging us to take that as our guiding star. The accepted truths we first encounter may not be as truthful as some claim.

Jesus certainly acts as our guide in digging deeper, but there is also the sense that he is encouraging us to develop what we might call a capacity for independent learning, forging these deeper truths within our hearts rather than relying on an unquestioning acceptance of what is offered us. St. Luke and St. John in their Gospels reflect more on how we might achieve this ability. St. Paul, in today’s second reading, notes that it is a “hidden wisdom”, not a philosophy of our age, and the crucial instrument of the revelation to us of such truths is the Spirit, for it is the Spirit who “reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God.”

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach