

POWER TO SERVE

Anna Robbins

We are responsible before God to hold them accountable to the people by whose authority they rule. It is part of our ministry to 'speak the truth to power'.

In book two of *The Republic*, Plato posits the account of a young man named Gyges who discovers a ring that allows him to appear invisible. The question is raised, what would any of us do if we thought we could get away with it? Surely, we only do good because we are compelled to do so. Remove the constraint of compulsion, and any of us will do whatever we think we can get away with, unseen. Amongst those who rule, however, we might have a higher expectation of some degree of ethical code or display of virtue. That was the way of Plato's philosopher king.

In recent months, we have been inundated again with reports of many governing representatives attempting to siphon off extra expenses from the public cash pot as though they were wearing rings that made them, and their actions, invisible. It is simply another round of scandalous behaviour that no longer surprises us with the lack of integrity displayed. Used to the resounding dissonance of corruption, we may yawn at the mention of public money paying for a moat; but injustice agitates us still when we hear of claims submitted for cat food and toilet seats. Moreover, it decimates our credibility in confronting political corruption abroad when it is so entrenched in the corridors of power at home. Show me your gold taps and I'll show you mine.

In another place and time, two rulers also thought they wore the ring of Gyges. King David saw something that he wanted and took it, killing a man in the process. The sulky King Ahab and his conniving wife abused their power to swindle a man out of his ancestral land, also killing him in the process. They did what they wanted because they thought they could get away with it. But God sent prophets to remind them that their power was provisional, and their actions visible.

The prophet Nathan confronted David with a story that brought David to a point of conviction before the Lord; Elijah pronounced judgement on Ahab who was perhaps too far gone from his faith to be recalled to a renewed relationship with God. Walter Brueggemann calls this 'speaking the truth to power' and he suggests that Christians need to do the same thing.¹

In a democracy, authority rests with the people. Our government leads only as we have invested its members with the authority that comes from God, and they are

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word the Redescribes the World*, Fortress, 2006.

accountable to God through the electorate. They, like us, are obliged to be accountable, not only because of God's judgement on wrongdoing, but as a matter of conscience. They, like us, are to pay dues, taxes, and honour, as a matter of justice. There can be no ring of Gyges for the people of God – no pinching the office pens when nobody is looking. And we are to bring that same light to bear on the actions of our elected officials – not in an act of judgement, but because we are responsible before God to hold them accountable to the people by whose authority they rule. It is part of our ministry to 'speak the truth to power'.

But for most of us, the thought of meeting with an MP to tell a story of corruption and judgment is not one that we intend to pursue. We are not likely to join a protest, or even write a letter to our elected officials, though such actions are part of what it means to speak the truth to power. Many of us are so disillusioned with politics that, as a general election nears, we throw up our hands in futility, wondering not how we should vote, but whether. It won't make any difference anyway.

To refuse to vote is to propagate the myth that people of power wear a ring of Gyges. To vote is to send a very clear message of visibility and accountability.² It says we know you care, and so do we, you are not alone. You are not alone in the responsibility of nurturing our society; you are not alone in seeking the common good. What you do for good or ill is seen, and makes a difference. When we vote, we engage an ethical act and encourage ethics; we speak the truth to power. We remind our rulers that there is only one Ruler whose power is absolute; he unmasks principalities and powers; he shines light into the darkness. He is more than a philosopher king; he is a servant king.³

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² Luke 12:48

³ Philippians 2:3-8