

The Top 100

Every couple of years Forbes magazine publishes a list of “The World’s top 100 Most Powerful People.” In the last edition, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and Angela Merkel were among the top five most powerful. This should come as no surprise, since these heads of state sit atop multi trillion dollar economies, with one million troops at their command, and hundreds of billions spent yearly on war weapons. These are the super-powers of the world.

But there is also another yearly list published by an obscure British magazine called Watkin’s Quarterly called “The World’s top 100 Spiritually Influential People.” In the top five were Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and Oprah Winfrey. These men and women have no armies and no coercive powers of the state, yet they are extremely powerful in shaping behavior and values. Now here is an amazing fact. Both of these lists claim to list the 100 most powerful people in the world, yet none of the 3 most powerful on the Forbes list appear anywhere in the top 100 on the Watkin’s list, and none of the 3 most spiritually influential on the Watkin’s list appear anywhere in the top 100 on the Forbes list; not even in 99th place. There are obviously two definitions of power, and two sources of power at play here.

There is one and only one exception, however, of someone who made the top five in both lists. Can you guess who this might be? Pope Francis. Pope Francis is both the leader of 1.3 billion Catholics and oversees trillions of dollars in wealth, yet his main tool of influence is not his wealth or weapons, but his inspired words and holy example.

Well today, as we recall Palm Sunday, when Jesus received a King’s welcome into Jerusalem, we could say that Jesus briefly made both lists—one of the most powerful and spiritually influential people-of Palestine. By this point, many had been influenced by his spiritual power; his miracles, healings and grace-filled teachings. Still more though, jumped on the bandwagon of this one-in-a-million homegrown talent, Jesus of Nazareth, who would be a force to reckon with on the world stage. We can’t forget the political dynamics of the time, and as Armenians it should not be hard to imagine. The Hebrew people, like Armenians, were a small people occupied by the Roman superpower; who taxed them oppressively and treated them like second class citizens. The Hebrew people wanted Jesus, the Messiah, to save them from Roman occupation, to fully restore the temple priesthood, to bring back their glory days under King David.

Well today, Palm Sunday, was Jesus’ day to consolidate his power. It was his campaign rally, his chance to gather in the troops; everyone was there and ready to follow. Only it appears that Jesus and the people had different definitions of power, looking at different lists. The crowds wanted him to ride in on a tall white horse with a chariot of war. But Jesus rode in on a donkey, an animal of humility and peace. They wanted a king wielding the powerful crown of David, he would be a King bearing a crown of thorns. They wanted to hear the shouts of soldiers. but they heard only the songs of children. The merchants wanted to have a good sales week on the Passover holiday, Jesus flipped over their trade tables and pointed them to the business of prayer. On Palm Sunday, continuing through Holy week, Jesus paradoxically seems to be giving away his worldly power, even as he claims more and more power that is not of this world. Because by the end of Holy Week, Jesus would be on the 100 least powerful list, tortured and executed as a criminal. But yet within a few generations, he would rise to become the most influential of all time, lifting his disciples and the rest of the world along with him.

Jesus still wields his great power and influence for us today, and Palm Sunday and Holy Week is our eternal reminder of what true power is and how to use it. On Holy Thursday he models for us how love is more powerful than hate. On Good Friday, that forgiveness is more powerful than hate. On Easter Sunday, that life with God is more powerful even than death. Now it’s easy to imagine that these power dynamics don’t apply much to you and me, because we feel relatively powerless. We aren’t Jesus, Putin or Trump, we don’t appear on any top 100 power lists. But are you sure you aren’t in some top 100? I’m probably in the top 100 most powerful priests in the Eastern Diocese (actually top 50 at least). You’re probably on the top 100 most powerful people in your neighborhood, where some people are living larger than you, but many more living much smaller. Make no mistake, like Pope Francis and Jesus before him, any Christian finds themselves on both lists. We all have been given certain wealth, position and influence, the trick is to learn to use whatever power and influence we do have in service of the power of God; whose love formed the world and reformed it by the eternal and self-giving grace of His Only Begotten Son. So let us follow Jesus into Jerusalem today on Palm Sunday, and relive this entire Holy Week, remembering that wherever we give self-centered power away, there the other-centered power of God’s love finds its place, mending whatever is broken, recovering what is lost, raising what is dead, now and always and unto the ages of ages, amen.