

Sermon for Christ The King

22 November 2020 8.45am Facebook Live

I wonder what image comes into your mind when you hear the word “king”?

Perhaps it's the kings of fairy tales, who live in impossible looking castles. Or perhaps you think of Henry VIII – especially with Hilary Mantel's books or if you prefer the Shardlake whodunnits. Maybe you think of George VI in the King's Speech. It probably makes you think of school history lessons – the kings and queens of England. Some were bad, some were good, and most were probably a mixture of both.

In the ancient world, things were very different. Kings were usually small time dictators – often in a kingdom covering a small geographical area. What we now call England used be 4 kingdoms, for example. The king's word was law, and keeping him happy and doing his will was usually the best way to stay alive. If the king was kind and generous, times were good; if he wasn't, it was tough.

The people of Israel in the Old Testament start off as an extended family which emerged from the descendants of Abraham. As a people they experience the ups and downs of life under kings, or pharaohs, in Egypt. In the time of Joseph they go to Egypt for food during a famine when the pharaoh was well-disposed to them. Later a king who did not know Joseph made them slaves.

They didn't have a human king of their own – they were a federation of tribes, united by a common ancestry and story. They were led by people that God called to that task - Moses and Joshua. Once they settled in the land of Canaan, when there was a crisis God called people to unite the tribes and lead them against their common foe – the Judges – and they were guided by them. It's worth noting that one of them was a woman – Deborah.

Later on, elders - essentially the heads of the respective branches of the families - are described as running this federation. They are described as being guided by Samuel the prophet. But as time went on, they hankered after having a king. Through Samuel God warns them that a king will tax them, conscript them in his armies, turn them into servants and take the fruit of their labours. But they insist. And a king they get for good or ill – the first one being King Saul.

From that moment, the story of the Old Testament is one of the ups and downs of those who rule Israel, and the struggles of the prophets to remind the kings of the right way. In the Bible we see a struggle between kings who get corrupted by the wealth and power that lures them away from God's purposes, and the prophets who are prepared to stand for justice and truth on God's behalf at any cost.

Now, if that is what kingship is like, and if that is what kings do, what on earth are we doing celebrating Christ as the King? That doesn't sound like Jesus!

I'd like to suggest that it is because we need to make sure we understand kingship right. I'd like to suggest that in Jesus Christ, we are shown what truly *divine* kingship looks like, and what all true kingship should always have looked like. The man who stood before Pontius Pilate in the story of Holy Week was precisely that.

Our problem is that all too often we have looked at earthly kings, and then projected their qualities onto God, rather than looking at Jesus Christ and asking why our earthly rulers don't model themselves on him.

So God, for many people, is a dictator or a tyrant with absolute power. In their minds, He is one who arbitrarily kills, punishes or humiliates. He is one who enslaves and oppresses, and who ensures that His subjects live in constant fear. But that is what human kings have so often been like. We have made their qualities, rather than challenge them with what divine kingship looks like.

Jesus Christ turns the whole notion of kingship, power and rule upside down. When he stands before Pilate in John's gospel, he says this. "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting...but as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

So that's the first difference. Jesus' kingdom is not one which involves fighting, nor is it one that involves slavery. Elsewhere he speaks of his rule as something he will share. Earlier in the gospel story he defines his relationship with his disciples as friendship and love. He has defined the qualities of his kingship as service and sacrifice. He will go to accept the human parody of kingship shown in crown of thorns and a reed in his hand, his tormentors little realising what truth they proclaimed. And that is the kind of king who sits on a throne in the reading we heard from Ephesians. The one on the throne with all at his feet, is actually the one who washed the feet of others.

Ultimately in place of the self-preservation instinct of the human king, Jesus will accept death itself.

This is important, because it goes to the heart of our notion of God, the images we hold when we pray, and the kind of relationship with God we believe to be possible.

When we pray, are we, in our minds eye, in a medieval court, where a word out of place might lose us our heads, or are we in a conversation with a friend we would trust with our lives?

And what does 'your kingdom come' mean as a prayer? At various points in Christian history, people have believed that force and compulsion have been ways to bring God's kingdom, such as the Crusades or when the nations of Europe built empires around the world and imposed Christianity with military superiority on the indigenous peoples. But the Christ who stands before Pilate, who stands only with the power of love and not of might - His kingdom will be about winning people over **by** love, not winning **against** them by the use of sheer power.

"We want a king", said the people of Israel in 1 Samuel 8. What they got was a human version of kingship that mistook human ambition for divine will. Their mistake was to lose sight of, and to lose faith in, the one true king they ever needed – God himself.

But eventually not only the people of Israel, but the whole world, had their request answered in full in the person of Jesus – God revealing Himself in human form showing himself to be the servant of all, and whose most powerful weapon was infinite and unconditional love. Only that sort of king, and only that sort of God is one in whom we can fully place our trust.