

## St Luke's, Sevenoaks on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2019

*Preacher: Laurence Pearce*

**Jeremiah 23.1-6   Colossians 1.11-20   Luke 23.33-43**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Have you ever wondered why, or even why, on earth, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King?

I ask because I can think of at least three reasons for steering clear of this theme.

*For a start*, the Old Testament writers were no fans - to put it mildly - of the institution of monarchy. Starting with the prophet Samuel, who unsuccessfully warned the people against making Saul their king, they saw monarchy as a second best, an admission of an inability to avoid aping the structures of their despised, 'unchosen' neighbours. These writers firmly believed that obeying God and his Law was enough to guarantee military and political success, and that if their God was their only king, then there would be no avoidable risk from predatory monarchs to their lives, wives and possessions. Such sentiments are vigorously expressed in Psalm 74, v.12, for example, which states that 'O God, you have been our king from the beginning: you have saved us many times'. And in Judges 8.22-23 when Gideon, whose courage and bravery had led to an offer of permanent power, turned this down, saying 'I will not rule over you, nor shall my son: the Lord will rule over you'. In short, they would have seen the institution of monarchy as a rejection by the people of God as their only true ruler. And, in any case, as many OT passages, including today's reading from Jeremiah and psalm 23 suggest, the Jews thought of their Lord as a sort of shepherd, whose role was to tend and care for them, rather than exploit and order them about.

*Secondly*, Jesus does not appear to have made any direct claim to being, or wanting to be, a king. Even though Nathaniel in the first chapter of John's gospel does call him the king of Israel, and the main theme of Jesus' preaching was the kingdom of God, and there is much sarcastic and ironic talk of his own kingship at his trial, Jesus himself never claimed to be a king.

*And, thirdly*, this feast day is a very recent development. In fact, it is only as old as my mother would be if she were still alive today, as both were 'born', so to speak, in 1925. The then pope was presumably seeking an alternative image and hero to Mussolini - rather than acting on profound new theological principles.

Whatever the motives, it seems to me like an anachronism, only twenty-five years before king Farouk of Egypt's prediction that soon only five kings would be left, the king of England and the kings of diamonds, hearts, clubs and spades?

But even I have to confess, Jesus' use of the language and imagery of kingship and kingdom is thought-provoking, and especially his answer to Pilate (in John 18.36) that 'my kingdom is not of this world'. In one sense, this is nonsense, since, when he taught us to pray 'thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven' he meant it. After all, all his parables are about the kingdom of God erupting into the everyday lives of everyday people. And first-century Jews did not see themselves as having souls distinct and separable from their bodies: the 'good life' and salvation were to be

lived in, and experienced in, the here and now and their physical bodies. And so it is with the church. *Its* role is not to be set apart from the world but to be an integral part of it, not so much to prepare its members for an afterlife but rather to work for this world's salvation by seeking justice and peace.

There is, however, no doubt that the kingdom Jesus wanted, and worked, to bring about has different values and priorities from those usually associated with authority and kingship.

Throughout history, the writ of the powerful has been promoted relentlessly through architecture, statuary, coinage and every other media available at the time. People have always been surrounded by images of royal or imperial or, more recently, Communist party rule, a rule often imposed by force or organized violence. And, as we know, such practices have also been followed by popes and Christian kings, but, in the kingdom - as preached by Jesus - there is a very different model where, to quote R.S.Thomas, '**there are quite different things going on**'.

Clearly, he was not trying to replace Herod, Pilate or Caesar. *His* followers were not tools of his will, or in uniform or under military orders or discipline - and they did not act from fear of punishment (even though it appears that at least some of them had hopes of material reward). He did not try to project power, vigour, success, wealth or glory, and his best remembered instruction to his followers was to 'wash one another's feet' (John 13.14). Memorably, his recruitment refrain was the unattractive and, you would have thought, counter-productive call to 'take up your cross and follow me' (Matthew 16.24). And the imagery we associate with his supposed kingship is, to say the least, not regal: his crown one of thorns not precious metals, his banner a scribbled and ironic sign, his throne a slave or criminal's cross, and his memorial feast a spare, simple meal.

You might have expected such a programme to have strictly limited appeal, and, in terms of numbers, it did - and still does. What is perhaps more surprising is that those who *can* follow this path - and seek this kingdom - often find that the '**quite different things going on**' meet their deepest needs and desires, of growth and reconciliation and community.

As the disciples who trotted around Palestine with Jesus realized, and as anyone who wants to follow him will also discover, the kingdom is all about growth into a totally new way of life. It is not about a set of intellectual beliefs or a moral code to keep people in order. And, as the disciples also found, it is about a journey that may prove costly in terms of identity and livelihood. And, because it is counter-cultural, it does not appeal to the risk-averse elements in us - let alone those of a society where games of conkers are frowned upon as potentially dangerous. It offers liberation from our destructive passions and the restricted identities that we build to keep others *and* our better instincts at bay and invites us to share the sense of freedom that Jesus so obviously enjoyed. This sense of freedom is probably what Peter was trying to recognise (in John 6.68) when he replied 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' after Jesus talked about being 'the living bread'. Surely he meant something like "When we are with you, we feel more alive, we find that our lives have more meaning, we feel more inspired with hope and less burdened with guilt, and we feel more able and open to love".

It is clear that Jesus shared his own sense of freedom with all he made contact with, by offering an unconditional welcome or forgiveness - even to tax collectors and prostitutes. He personified the truth that forgiveness starts with a refusal to demand retribution or inflict revenge. And he was

able to demonstrate that forgiveness is not a sort of divine launderette or divine amnesia but a release from self-confinement and a way into reconciliation.

It is noticeable that throughout his ministry and even as the cross beckoned Jesus called the members of his little community 'friends'. As in all friendships, and true communities, this openness broke down all the usual barriers, such as different cultural backgrounds and personal jealousies and resentments: basically it made Jesus' followers worthy of love and free to love in return.

Clearly, new life, forgiveness and community are only some of the '**quite different things going on**' in the kingdom. Others one could add, for example, include service, the absence of domination and healing.

I will end with the whole of R.S. Thomas' poem 'the Kingdom' from which I've already quoted one line three times, because it contains many images of the reversals of expectations when God is truly in charge.

For instance, it has the 'poor' in every sense as the protagonists, and the whole tone is tentative and exploratory rather than strident and assertive.

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are *quite different things going on*:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
healed: mirrors in which the blind look  
at themselves and the love looks at them  
back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself  
of desire. And present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
of your faith, green as a leaf.