



20th November 2016
Jeremiah 23.1-6
Luke 23.32-43

The Powerful Powerlessness of The Cross

Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

This autumn's TV schedules have screened two series about two queens. ITV had Victoria and Netflix's The Crown – a biopic covering the first ten years of our present Queen's reign that rang up 100 million pounds worth of production costs.

These Queens began their reigns over a century apart yet both, it seems, quickly learnt that a Constitutional Monarchy either severely limits, or in some cases totally removes, the onetime unquestioning power of the sovereign.

Today churches throughout the world are marking the end of the liturgical year of Luke with Christ the King Sunday and this is a day on which we return once more to the question: What sort of King was Christ?

Our reading from the Jewish Scriptures is both a resounding condemnation of monarchy and a longed for hope that one day soon a better king would come Israel's way – one in the tradition of their greatest sovereign, King David.

In this ancient near eastern world it was customary to use the picture language of shepherds to describe kings, and that's what Jeremiah is doing here. He talks of bad shepherds who had led their flock into dangerous terrain and who had been reckless with their charge.

The result of such bad governance would eventually lead to the Exile. But, says Jeremiah, God will bring his people home and one day a new king will rule and the good times will come back.

Now, you don't need to be much of a social scientist to discern that it's obvious from this Jeremiah passage that Israel had a turbulent relationship with monarchy. On the one hand, they rushed to blame bad kings for the country's woes yet on the other they longed for a good king to emerge and bring them into a new dawn.

It seems that the notion of Kingship has been fraught with a certain difficulty from the beginning. It's never been a neutral office because those who wear the crown bring their own personality to the role and in the days when monarchs ruled absolutely such power could make a whole royal house absolutely corrupt.

So giving God the title of King – as is often practiced in the Psalms – has an obvious risk attached to it depending on whether or not the current occupant of the throne was benign or aggressive.

Today's New Testament reading takes us to Jesus' crucifixion and the title Pilate ordered to be nailed above his cross declaring that he was the 'King of The Jews'

Now in many ways this is as ironic a title as it is absurd – especially when erected by a Roman Provincial Governor.

The idea of a Messiah in Jewish thought was that such a person was literally God's 'anointed' one. And the name 'Christ' in Greek also literally means 'anointed'.

Yet it was by no means clear, even in Jesus' day, who this anointed one was or what such a leader might stand for.

Perhaps the most popular idea around – one that grew in the days of political oppression as Israel groaned under the weight of Roman occupation – was that the Messiah would be a subversive – that he would rise up militarily against Rome and bring about the dawn of national independence.

Men like Barabbas belonged to this subversive group – maybe the two criminals crucified next to Jesus did as well.

Read the gospels and it becomes clear that Pilate didn't really understand the Jesus who stood before him. Yet he is swayed by his advisors and the baying of the crowd and decides Jesus too is a subversive – an enemy of the state – a so called Messiah in that popular sense of the word. And so, he commands that his crucifixion epitaph should be: Jesus, King of the Jews.

But it's deeply questionable that Jesus ever saw himself that way. His Messiahship was subversive yet in a non-violent way. It's precisely because he wasn't zealot enough that Judas betrayed him trying to force his hand in order that he became more aggressive.

Jesus' subversive teaching was about the last becoming first, about turning the other cheek and forgiving seventy times seven – it was epitomised in his acceptance of the marginalised and his ability to see Godliness in foreigners.

Ironic, in a way then, that so soon after his crucifixion Christians should have taken Pilate's misplaced title for Jesus, King of the Jews, and been so keen to rework it in such a way that he quickly becomes Christ the King.

At one level that might seem appropriate yet at another it had perhaps the unintended consequence that within 300 years Christianity was so tied up with Constantine's state that the Church became a symbol of power and authority in the land and actually something of the authentic and radically subversive message of the real Jesus – who stood on the side of the poor – was lost with the creation of the likes of Prince Bishops and Magisterial Popes.

However, let's be clear - in saying Jesus was not a Zealot in the tradition of say the Independence Freedom Fighter Barabbas, that doesn't mean he was a quietist just interested in a pietistic faith which is essential individualistic and spiritual.

Jesus of Nazareth was, in so many ways, a radical subversive – and those Advent songs, called by the Church Magnificat and Benedictus, which Luke puts into the mouths of Mary and Zechariah as they anticipate the births of Jesus and John, speak so eloquently of God coming to bring freedom, liberation, justice and hope to those who feel oppressed and forgotten.

Jesus' mission, Jesus' teaching and Jesus' actions celebrates the dignity and potential of every human being with whom he came into contact.

Irenaeus, a Church Father from the second century, once famously put it like this: The glory of God is a person fully alive. I just love that, so much so that I'm going to say it again: The glory of God is a person fully alive.

The Jesus story is surely the supreme example of that.

The Jesus who joins in wedding celebrations, who gathers people from the margins and offers them hope, who inspires his followers to constantly open the door of reconciliation, who challenges oppression and advocates justice.

This Jesus spoke not only of prayer and worship but also of life and living. And he made it clear that a love for God was inadequate if that same love didn't also extend to neighbour.

In 1925 when Pope Pius instituted the Feast of Christ the King he was so conscious of the corrupt and secular regimes springing up all over Europe in the run up to the second world war. And part of his rationale for the introduction of this new date in the liturgical calendar was to emphasise Jesus as a different sort of King from the authoritarian dictatorships now becoming established in the capitals of the West.

Yet, all these years later it's still a valid question to ask: What sort of King is Jesus?

Well he wore a crown of thorns and was crucified upon a cross. And as one bible commentator has helpfully put it: This crucifixion confronts the norms of power with a new way of being and ultimately a new way of being God.

This is the Powerful Powerlessness of The Cross.

This language of God talks of sacrificial love, of selfless giving and grace motivated forgiveness.

Jesus blesses our world with the idea of loving service not dominating power.

In so many ways all of us in church this morning have a certain degree of power

available to us. As an expression of faith what's important is how we use that power.

The money we give away. The role modelling we offer to a younger generation. The use we make of the structures we control at work to encourage those lower down the pecking order. The way we 'let go' as parents yet always stay in the background as our children's greatest supporters but never their controllers.

Power is not intrinsically bad – it's how we use it that is a mark of our discipleship of Jesus who was, as someone wisely noted, 'the Man for Others'.

Surely our prayers for Street Kids Direct, our prayers for this town of Amersham, our prayers for our family and our church is to say with Irenaeus that those around us are truly alive – and so reflect the glory of God. And maybe, just maybe, something we offer to each other in loving and faithful service can become a small part in making that a reality.

Christ the King.
Jesus the crucified.
The God who serves.

To close here's one of the most precious stories in our family's collection.

Rachel's father was headmaster of one of the most respected schools in town. To the thousand students under him he was probably viewed as one of the most powerful people in their lives – at least for a short while.

Coming back from a meeting out of school one day he stopped off at the newsagents and found one of his pupils in the queue playing truant. Their meeting on this neutral property might have been embarrassing at the weekend but on a school day it was obviously excruciating for the student!

Rachel's' dad, Dr Hopkins, however used his power so wisely and gently that day. To a red faced and anxious student he simply said: Hello, want a lift back to school? And he took the boy back and said no more about it.

I suspect in the whole of that boy's school career he learnt no finer lesson than the way his Head Teacher treated him with such grace and kindness that day in the queue at the newsagents.

On this Christ the King Sunday we thank God for the powerlessness of the cross and for the Jesus who came among us as a servant full of grace and truth.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ian Green: Amersham 18th November 2016