

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Christ the King

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Sunday 25th November 2012

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Mark 15: 1-4, 16-20, 25-32

This Sunday, the last one before the beginning of the new church year with the first Sunday of Advent, is known as Christ the King Sunday. Advent traditionally thinks of Christ's coming and coming again, and this day points forward to that by reminding us that Christ is King: King and head of the church, and ruler of the whole world. The verses which we read from Daniel are one of the prophecies which the Christian Church has always used to point forward to the coming of Jesus and his royally divine origin and status. In this twenty-first century, even in a country which has a monarchy, still the idea of Christ as King sounds a little alien, a little old-fashioned, maybe. After all, Kings nowadays are usually figure-heads, to be given respect, yes, but with little real power.

But Daniel, in his vision, is describing someone with lots of real power. Daniel was the exile of a King: a King who had had the power to uproot him and force him to live far from home, spending his life in service to the very power which had so treated him. And so when he had a vision of God's servant King coming, he sees him coming with more power than even Nebuchadnezzar could imagine: he comes from one who is wrapped around in flame and smoke, served by thousands upon thousands, and he comes wrapped up in storm clouds - again an untameable force of power - and given eternal dominion.

Yet when we read of Jesus' death in Mark's Gospel we might be forgiven for asking if this really could be talking of Jesus at all. All of Daniel's power and glory and dominion seems very far from the Jesus we saw on trial and put to death. We saw him as an abject prisoner, humbled before the power of Rome as represented by Pilate, and accused of many things. We saw the title he had been given in accusation, King of the Jews, being used in mockery and torture - the sort of behaviour those soldiers indulged in would have been very much in contravention of the Geneva convention of human rights, had such a thing been dreamed of back then. We saw him strung up to die, with the accusation that he was King of the Jews nailed above his head and the people still mocking him for it from the ground. Glory, power and dominion? Where are they now?

A few weeks ago, as we have been reading Mark's gospel, we saw James and John asking to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory (Mark 10:37). Jesus told them that they didn't know what they were asking for, and spoke in what were no doubt mysterious terms about drinking from a cup and being baptised. For Jesus knew that the road to his glory, the road to the glory and power of Daniel's vision lay only one way: it was to be reached only via the cross.

In this world Jesus never was given a coronation, except that given him in pain and mockery by those who pressed the crown of thorns on his head. He was never lifted up above all others to be looked at with wonder, except when he was lifted up above the heads of the crowds on his cross. And those at his right and left hand were not his friends and followers, but the lowest of the low, humanly speaking.

King of the Jews: he never claimed that title. It was given him by those who wanted to accuse him of rebellion, who wanted to show him as a political threat. He was not the King of the Jews,

although he came of the royal line (as did many, many others). Jesus was the Messiah, God's chosen messenger, and he was to become the Christ, the anointed one. Anointing meant that divine power was given. Jesus was to be the powerful one, the ruler, the King of all. But you would never have guessed it from the way he was crowned, would you?

Those watching would not. But an attentive disciple, then or now, perhaps should have. After all we have found ourselves coming back to the the sermon on the mount again and again as we have gone with Jesus to his suffering and death, and it was in that famous discourse that he made this amazing and difficult statement: "The meek shall inherit the earth". (Matthew 5:5)

The meek are the humble, those who do not make a loud noise about themselves or fight their own corner or act as though life is all about them. These, in God's economy, are the important, the trustworthy ones. These are the ones who God will honour with power and authority - the very people who do not want it, who never think about it, who do not think about their own position in the world at all!

Why is it that it is so difficult for us to trust politicians these days? As a class they are probably the most un-trusted group of people, closely followed by journalists. Is it not because they ask us to trust them, they set themselves up as having the answers? In particular those who want to rise to the top never have a time when they feel they can say that they don't know or that what they think on any subject doesn't matter. We don't trust people like that because instinctively we think that although they may have lots of good ideas, may even have some of the answers, it too often seems that these are almost incidental to their own personal ambition: they have answers because that is the way to get where they want to be, with power and authority.

Maybe I'm too hard on politicians. I'm not saying that they are bad people - few are - but that they are caught in a system which only works if used in a certain way and it is not the way of meekness. So who will you trust?

If you are in trouble of some kind, who will you turn to? Your family, I expect. Or your friends. You will turn to people who you can trust to look at you, to see you. When you are telling your story, who do you want to tell it to? Someone who will listen in silence, or someone who will immediately try to cap it "Oh that's nothing, I remember....!" The true friend is the one who gives us their time and their attention, and lets us feel that who we are and what we feel matters to us is truly important. They are the ones we will in turn love and trust and learn from. These are the meek, who inherit the earth.

Who will you trust? I would trust the person who looks at the people and the problems of the world, and listens, not rushing into speech. There is a slogan in the Church of Scotland's work with poorer communities in Scotland: "Nothing about us without us is for us." That takes a little thinking about. What it means is that no solution to poverty can be imposed by those who are on the outside of the problem. You need to listen to those who are on the inside. Theologically, of course, that is just what Jesus did, it is what we celebrate every Christmas, that God became one of us took on the whole human condition with all its limitations, delights and tragedies, so that that he could show us that he knows us and what he proposes for us is done with us and for us. In taking on the human condition, God took on the consequence of humanity, the misuse of power. He sent his Son and those who wanted power for its own sake, for the enhancing or preserving of their status, used, misused their power to put him to death.

Some of them were the ones who wanted to see a King of the Jews, and were disappointed that Jesus would not be the king they sought, who would have confirmed them in their positions. Some of them were those who feared to see a King of the Jews, because then the position they had been given by a foreign power might dissolve away like river mist in summer.

The delightful irony of Jesus' death is that it was precisely this which was his coronation, it was because he went faithfully to death that he was confirmed as the Messiah - the messenger, and the Christ - the anointed one. It was because "*He was humble and walked the path of obedience to death, his death on the cross*" that "*God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name, so that in honour of the name of Jesus all those in heaven and on the earth and in the world below should fall on their knees and all should openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord.*" (Philippians 2:8-11)

The great call and command of Jesus to his followers was the simple instruction he gave to his disciples to "Follow me". We are to follow him, to obey him as our King, by being like him in attitude as well as action. Indeed at times we will be called to inaction - as Jesus was passive before his accusers. We are called to be humble and meek, and the only way to achieve this is to forget about yourself altogether. My Father had a wry line he would come out with when he thought someone was getting above themselves and thinking themselves of too much importance - that included his children, of course. He would smile a guileless smile and say "Humility, and how I achieved it." We got the point. No one who thinks about themselves, who thinks about their own humility ever achieves it. Even to talk about it like this can be self-defeating.

Jesus never spoke of his humility. Instead he spoke of loving neighbours and enemies, of turning the other cheek - even when that is to invite more pain - of going the second mile - even when, as we saw with Simon last week, that is to be misunderstood, of praying in secret and being rewarded in secret, of seeking first of all God's kingdom and his righteousness. He spoke of this and what he spoke of is what he did, with perfect integrity, and so we worship him as King.

We worship Christ as King precisely because he did not fight for that honour. It is because he went to his death, not in a blaze of death-or-glory, like other heroes of legend, but quietly, willingly, humbly that we remember and revere him. It is because he is different from the powerful of the earth that we seek to follow his ways. It is because he remained faithful to his faith in God, faithful to his own high teaching, faithful to us, that we know that he is not only King, but Son of God - as the centurion said - and can turn to him with all our lives.

Amen