

# Laggan and Newtonmore

## Church of Scotland

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**24th November 2019**

Luke 23:33-43

Jeremiah 23:1-6

This Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Just as there is a calendar year and a financial year and an academic year, so there is a liturgical year, and it begins with the first Sunday of Advent – next week. And this last Sunday of the year is known as the Sunday of Christ the King.

To talk of Christ the King is a political statement. To talk of kingship is to talk of power, and to talk of Christ is to talk of power, and so today is all about power: who has it and how it is wielded. It is a day for politics – just when you thought that you would get away from that for at least an hour by coming to church! When we talk of Christ the King, we get all the rest of our politics and power-plays into perspective, and mostly they are shown up as shoddy and very second rate. Because today we talk of the way that Jesus shows us God's power, the way that he wields it in the world. And so today we read of Jesus' crucifixion.

When we talk of Christ as King we are immediately stymied by the shortcomings of language. We can only use the words we have, but the words we have, carry overtones which then become part of the way that we look at things. The work King is one of these.

King is problematic for God's people right the way back into the Old Testament. Do you remember that when the Israelites put out the inhabitants of Canaan and settled into their promised land, at first they had no one person in charge. From time to time God would raise up a leader, who were known as judges – people to make sure things were done right and give a lead in this. This was different from the way that the people around were led – they had kings, rulers with absolute power over their tribe or nation. God's point was that his people should be

different, because God is different, and his notion of power, what it is and how it should be used is different from the prevailing human idea – then and now. But God’s people were human, of course, and so they weren’t sure that they liked being different. They wanted a King.

The story of how they wanted a King is told in the book of 1 Samuel. Samuel, who was the last of the judges – and maybe also the first of the prophets – reminded them more than once that God was their ruler, the one who not only told them how to live, but cared for them and provided for them – which a human king would not always do. Samuel reminded them of how human kings tended to behave and how a king would take their sons to serve in his army or in his fields, leaving them without the work of the strong young men on the home farms. He warned them that the king would demand their daughters to serve in the palace as maids and cooks. He told them that a king would demand a tribute of their produce and take their best land for himself – just because he was king and he could. He said that in effect they would all end up as the king’s slaves – they, who had been set free from slavery in Egypt.

And that is how the kings of Israel behaved – some more so than others. Just as it was how the kings of the lands around behaved – some more so than others. And it is how kings and rulers, and presidents and prime ministers of various countries have behaved and still try to behave – some more so than others. And it is why it is really problematic to call Christ King. And it is why on the Sunday of Christ the King, we end up reading about Jesus’ crucifixion. Because God’s kingship is different. It is not less, but more powerful, but it shows its power in different ways.

One of our hymns puts it this way “This is your coronation, thorns pressed upon your head”. The only coronation Jesus, Christ, was given was at the time of his crucifixion, and it was given as torture and mockery, human power showing that in fact he was powerless. And this was how it had to be, because in the crucifixion God was turning all ideas of power on their head. God was showing us that real power does not vaunt itself and strive for recognition and govern by fear. (Sometimes people have liked to portray God as fearful and vengeful, but that is us putting our human experience of power onto God, rather than looking at God to see how he really acts.) God, as he promised through his prophet Jeremiah, exercises his power to care for his people

and to give them a safe way of living. God is the one who shows his power with justice – which remember means making things right – and with righteousness, which means doing the right thing. And that kind of power, which is the power of love cannot be compared to the power of oppression and greed and self-interest which is the usual way that we encounter it in the world.

To exercise that kind of power, God's power in God's way is what it means to be Christ. If we are to talk about Christ the King, we need to be sure that the phrase does not subtly allow us to see Jesus the Christ more as a human king. What it should do, if we are thinking rightly, is to seek to encourage our human kings – which means rulers and governors and politicians and public servants of all stamps – to be more like Christ. If Christ is King, then all human power should bow before him and seek to emulate his way of self-forgetting love, because that is the way and the power of God.

Thinking about the words, Christ and King led me to think about all the words that we hear spoken in the short passage from Luke's gospel which we read. It is a short passage, but it shows the problem with the power of the world very well: it is noisy, but no one listens to anyone else. Did you notice that. People are speaking in almost every verse of the passage, and almost no one listens.

First Jesus speaks asking God to forgive those who were crucifying him. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And no one reacts. No one seems to hear what he says or stops to think about what it might mean. The people to whom it most immediately applies (though the application is far wider, you might say stretching out even to you and me) the soldiers are too busy gambling for Jesus' clothes – getting what they can for themselves out of this death. That is the way of worldly power, to get what you can.

Then the leaders of the people scoff at Jesus, saying that if he were truly the Messiah, the Christ, he would save himself. But of course it is because Jesus is truly the Christ that he will not think or act for himself but will endure what he must for the redemption of the world. The soldiers mocking is along the same lines. This time Jesus is told that if he is King, he will save himself. And the unrepentant thief takes it one step further, mocking Jesus and saying that if he is Christ, he will save himself "and us". Even in his own death he is looking for his own

benefit. This is the way of worldly power. It is loud and it doesn't listen to anyone else.

The power of the worldly kings is a loud power, a self-absorbed power and yes, we see it still in a lot of the electioneering which is currently going on around us. And we see it the way that society treats its supposedly lesser citizens. You don't have to look to dictatorships or absolute monarchies to see the evils of power that Samuel laid out before his people. You do have to look to Jesus to see the positive image of the godly king and serving ruler that Jeremiah promises his people. You can, or should, and yes sometimes you can, look to those who follow Jesus to find the way of the cross still embodied and lived out in the world today. The way that listens and responds to people where they are – even if like the repentant thief they are at the absolute bottom of the pile. The way that cares about justice – things being done and put right – and doing God's good for its own sake. The way of caring and making the world safe for everyone, not just for oneself or our tribe.

So, Christ the King? Yes, and no. No if we are going to look Kings to see what Christ is like, who he is, what his priorities are. Yes, if we are going to look to Christ to see what kings and rulers should be like: who they should resemble, whom they should put first, what their purpose in life should be.

At the end of the liturgical year, before we go into Advent, it is worth thinking about Christ the king, and in doing so to hold our lives up to the prism of his kingship and his Christ-ship. All of us have power in some measure: at work, in the community, at home in the family, in our clubs and organisations. How do we use that power – to serve ourselves, and promote our interests, or to listen and love and put ourselves out?

And what about our church? Where do we make the time and space to listen to others, within or outwith our body? Where do we put ourselves out to serve? (And what does me standing in this pulpit have to say about how people perceive the minister?)

If Christ is King, then let us follow him in his way into the next year of the church's life.