

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Slogans

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 20th November 2011

Matthew 25:31-46
Ephesians 1:15-23
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

This is the last Sunday of the Christian year, and is known as "Christ the King Sunday". And probably we think that we know what that means. It means what our reading from Ephesians says, that

"God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything."

In other words it means that Jesus has become King of the world, indeed of this world and the next. It means that there is nothing that is out-with his interest, concern and control. It means that we, as God's reborn children, as Jesus' brothers and sisters, are members of the divine royal family. We have entered the Kingdom of God and daily we bow before and live in unity with Christ the King.

It does mean just this, of course. But here is something to ponder: Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of heaven, but only in parables did he talk about a king. Only when the King was a character in a story. He never said that there was a King in God's kingdom. This may seem like splitting hairs: if it is the Kingdom of God, surely that means that God is the King. Doesn't he refer to himself as King in today's parable of the judgement?

Extrapolating precise and definite meaning from figurative language and story is not as simple as it sometimes appears. And if in the Kingdom of God, God is the King, and Jesus the prince (we call him Prince of Peace, don't we?) then who is the King in the Kingdom of heaven? And what do we mean by King anyway? Is what the word means to us the same as it meant to Christ? Is having and being a king always a good thing?

We live and have had our presuppositions set growing up in a monarchy. So, you might think that we would know more about kings than people living in lands which have rid themselves of a royal family, or which have never had one at all. But do we? Doesn't our convoluted constitutional history teach us that there are problems with royalty? Isn't the reason why we have retained a monarchy simply because we have tamed it? Over the years we have set limits to what our monarch can do. We have forbidden the king or queen to actually determine how the country is governed, we have denied them even the vote which their subjects have, we have ruled that they have no right even to state a public opinion on many matters, and have made rules about whom they may marry, and what faith they may profess. In some ways - only in some ways, because of course they do have riches and privileges we cannot imagine for ourselves, but in some ways - our monarch is one of the most restricted people in the land.

The reason for our hedging the monarch around with such prohibitions and restraints is the same reason that many of our neighbours have rid themselves of monarchy all together: a king, in the old absolutist sense, is a dangerous person. A king has the power of life and death over his subjects, he can do as he pleases and no one can hold him to account. That is the kind of king who often helped

bring darkness to the dark ages, and who so enraged the thinking minds of the enlightenment, that people became willing to rise up and declare the perceived injustice and do something about it. This is the kind of King known to people in Biblical times. Kings like David, who, though often a good king, could yet arrange the killing of Uriah the Hittite because he wanted his wife; Kings like Artaxerxes, who could treat his wife like a pet animal to be displayed to his friends at will. In the Roman empire of Jesus' day, the emperor could order every person to return to his home town to be counted, disrupting millions of lives. In that day even minor sub-kings like Herod could, with impunity, order the slaughter of innocent children.

This is Christ the King Sunday, but is having a king, is naming someone king, necessarily a good thing? It was no part of God's original intention to give his people a king, remember. He was to be the only king for his people, and Samuel his prophet argued fervently against anointing a human monarch. God was to be the only king, and God's ideas about kingship are very different from human ideas. It is not just to play with words that it has been said that in the Kingdom of God there is no king, but only a Father. Or, in the light of our reading from Ezekiel, we might say that there is no king but only a shepherd. God offers himself and offers one like, one descended from David the shepherd-king to tend, to care for his sheep, his people. God offers himself as the tender judge who lifts up those who have been ill-used in the system of human power and influence. In some ways, certainly in the understanding of the exiles in Babylon to whom Ezekiel spoke, exiles who had suffered much from the power and pride of the Babylonian kings, God offers himself as the anti-king.

In Biblical times, as we have seen, kings were not known for their gentleness and concern; but like them or fear them, they were to be obeyed. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God says that gentleness is to be the new norm among his people. He sends to us his Son, and Christ models a different understanding of kingship, no longer wilful, and self-centred; no longer harsh and unpredictable; but giving and concerned; the servant king. So Jesus' kingship is very different from human monarchy. Yet the shepherding of God, the Fathering of God has two things in common with the ancient idea of kingship. As we have seen from the reading from Ephesians, it has, God has, Christ has power. That is the first thing. And the second is that it asks for, it needs the same obedience.

So when Jesus says "Follow me" he means that living as he lived, and relating to people as he related to them, and as he relates to us, is not an optional extra. The intent of the parable of the sheep and the goats is quite clear: there are things we are to do, people we are to care for and provide for, duties we cannot ignore. We are to do these things, not just in a "spiritual" way, but in concrete reality. Nowadays we might feel that this giving and caring is not the job of the church. We have, or are supposed to have a welfare state. Surely this sort of care has become a political matter, in the doing or failure to do these things a government stands or falls.

But this is the day we remember Christ the *King*. This is not just a figure of speech: we remember that Christ is really the overall king, and a king is a political being. A good king, a servant king will care deeply about the welfare of his subjects in every respect. The parable suggests that at the last judgement some of us may be in for a shock. The questions we will face will not be "Did you go to church? Did you say your prayers? Did you read your Bible?" When Christ the King comes he will ask the kingly questions, which are political: 'Did you feed the hungry? Did you clothe the naked? Did you welcome the stranger? Did you visit the prisoner, care for the sick? The questions are political, and like any political question, the answers have consequences.

The shepherd-king asks us to do things his way; as his servants, to obey. The Christian insight is that if we want to get the most out of life then obedience to God is the way. 'Follow the Maker's instructions' as the Christian Aid poster had it, with the picture of a gift-wrapped world.

Our Lord's new commandment is that we love one another, and love our neighbours as ourselves, as

he has loved us, that the world may know we are his disciples.

Our King is only *our* king if our lives show that we follow him. There was once a poster which said "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" The evidence which God is looking for is that we should act as he acts, care for those for whom he cares, turn to him for the wisdom and strength to do these things. I said that we won't be judged on how well we prayed or studied scripture. Yet these things are important too, for it is in time spent deliberately with God that we get to know God better, and begin to see things, to see other people with his eyes. It is in time spent with God that we gain his Spirit giving us the will and the strength to be bothered, when others are not.

How did Paul put it to the church in Ephesus?

"But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him - endless energy, boundless strength!"

God grant that we may be the tireless wise servants of Christ the King.

Amen