

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Sing my Song Backwards

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 21st November 2010

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Luke 23:32-43

This, the last Sunday of the Christian year, the last Sunday before Advent, is known as Christ the King Sunday. It was instituted by our European Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in the 1920s, at a time when power was, in many parts of Europe - Italy, for instance, or Germany - becoming more totalitarian and less humane. People, thought the church fathers, needed reminding of who is the real King of all.

Christ the King. There are many portions of Scripture we could read which talk of Jesus as King, even more if we talk of God as our sovereign. We could have looked at some of the Advent prophecies. We could have read from some of St. Paul's descriptions of Christ exalted in heavenly glory - "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation" and so on. We could have turned to the book of Revelation and read of thousands upon thousands adoring Christ the Lamb. But we have instead read about his crucifixion. We have read about the enthronement of Christ as King.

"Sing my song backwards, from end to beginning" runs one of Brian Wren's less well-known songs. The Kingship of Christ only makes sense if you run the thing in reverse, if you look back from the point of the cross. It is only when you look at a whole life that it makes sense.

The prophecies all told that the Messiah would be King, and that was what the people expected. He would be King, not as others were, not for his own interest, but for their good. That was what Jeremiah meant when he talked about raising up for David a righteous branch who would rule wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land. That was what Ezekiel meant when in similar vein he talked of God himself becoming the shepherd of his people. God would send the Messiah, the son of David, and he would be the true and righteous King. And so the line of David was watched closely, to see when the King who would be different would appear.

So Jesus came. Soon we are going to be remembering the time of his coming, the angelic messages, the mysterious conception, the ordinary birth made extraordinary by the song of angels, the configuration of the stars and the worship of mysterious visitors. It looked like things were going to expectations, as the shepherds returned to their hills rejoicing, and Simeon praised God and said he had with his own eyes seen God's salvation; a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of his people Israel.

And the next time we see Jesus in the gospels, still things seem to be going to plan. He is in the temple, astounding the religious leaders with his wisdom. Just as a wise and Godly King might well do. And again the years pass. Now the adult Jesus comes on the scene. But not with demands, not seeking to overthrow the powers that be, not trying to do things like the kings of the earth. After all, why should he? The whole point was that he would be different. The people had looked forward to a king coming who was different. They got what they wanted, but they didn't like it.

The leaders didn't like the fact that Jesus didn't defer to them. He didn't endorse their position and their authority. The respectable people (and most people like to think that they are respectable) didn't like it that he seemed to spend more time with the outcasts and the sinners. *They* quite liked him, of course, it was nice to be thought to matter and not just condemned out of hand, for a change. Most of all the political leaders didn't like him. They didn't know what to make of him. If he had come demanding homage, asserting his rights, claiming divine or human right to rule, they would have understood him. They knew how to assess those sorts of claims, and what to do, whether they decided to accept or reject them.

But God's promised King was different, not in being stronger and more glorious, but in being like God: humble, seeking, pleading, serving, forgiving. His kingdom was not geographic, a matter of boundary and maps and law; it was a matter of love and total allegiance. The kings of the earth were content with getting their due, in revenue, in outward respect; but God's promised King looked at the whole of a person and demanded that he or she "follow me."

He came to those who should have been his own, those who were waiting for him, were expecting him; but he came in different form from what was precisely expected, and they could not cope. There was one glorious day when he was hailed as king and saviour, but it was a flash in the pan, designed to try to force him to act by the human script: to be different, but just a little different; to be just a little better than the others, just enough to come out on top.

And it failed, as it was bound to fail. Even as the city cheered in encouragement, he wept over their false hopes and empty hearts. He saw what they were up to and purposely began to speak against their hopes and expectations. He showed that their allegiances were self-serving, that the temple they took pride in was corrupt and impermanent. He showed that he was different and they realised that they didn't want what was different. They wanted the familiar made just a bit better, but that wasn't what he was going to do. He wasn't going to play things their way. He wasn't going to change and adopt their wisdom.

And so they enthroned him on his cross. They named him King as they got rid of him and put him to death. And even then he was different, not crying and cursing in agony, but forgiving. And when he was hailed as just by one of those condemned with him, he offered reassurance. What we read today from Luke shows us the King, the shepherd King, coming into his kingdom. We see him naked, abused, mocked and left to die. That was the King. That is the King. He is different.

Sing my song backwards. Yet it is from the cross, even before we come to the wonder of the resurrection, that it all makes sense. How could God's King preach God's love and not follow that teaching through? How could he teach forgiveness and not offer it when it was most needed and hardest to give? He had never said that his way would lead to riches or ease, so how could he with integrity turn from the hard path of love and service just when things became difficult? If anything of what he said and did was to be true, if the wonder of his birth was to have any meaning, then it had to end with this coronation. If people were to know that this really was God's Son, God's King then he had to be really and radically and righteously and redemptively different. That was the only way it could make sense. God sent his King to draw us up into his way of doing things. Anything less than what Jesus in humility and integrity did would have been making God too small.

Next week we enter advent and prepare to watch in wonder as God is born among us. It makes no sense if we cannot also keep in mind his end, his "coronation". It becomes just a great story about a baby. Sing my song backwards and get the full wonder. And as we lead up to Christmas and sing hymns of angels, and wonder at the infamy of entirely fictitious innkeepers, and have our sentimental side stirred by the idea of the animals bowing down and the baby lying in the hay, we need to remember that all of that would mean nothing, would not even be remembered to be so embroidered were it not for the other end of the story.

It is easy to adore the baby Jesus and to wonder at God's love. But we are called to follow Jesus the man, the different king. And he was honest, and his life was full of truth. He showed and he warned that following him would mean keeping going with him through misunderstanding and rejection, through suffering and hatred. But he still calls us to follow, to give our total allegiance. Many look forward to rehearsing the Christmas story; I do myself. I love all that it says about the greatness of God and his love. I rejoice to see that my God is so great that he needn't stand on ceremony, insisting on his rights, but can humble himself to be one of us. Fewer of us look forward to watching with Christ through Gethsemane and Calvary, far less to enduring our own times of betrayal and rejection, of lonely suffering. But we are called to follow, called to give our allegiance to Christ the King. We are called to follow God by being disciples of that different king who the baby grew to become. And that means being different ourselves: different in what matters to us, in what we expect of ourselves, in what we are prepared to endure from others.

God grant that we be enabled to be faithful followers, true subjects of Christ, the different, shepherd King.

Amen.