



Revelation 1.4b-8
John 18.33-37
25th November 2018

Kingship – a broken metaphor?

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

Earlier this month the Prince of Wales celebrated his 70th birthday. Like all the twenty predecessors before him, Prince Charles has had to accept his destiny rather than search for it. Kings and Queens don't usually have to apply for the post.

In today's gospel from John, which is usually viewed as the second of seven acts that make up the Passion Story, Jesus is being interviewed by Pontius Pilate. Again, and again the interrogation gets back to the idea of kingship.

There is no getting away from the fact that the idea and development of kingship is part of the Jewish scriptures. It's not only an idea that finds expression in the Davidic monarchy it's also a metaphor for God.

Earlier in the service we said the psalm allocated for today and it's first line went: The Lord is King and has put on glorious apparel...

Many of the psalms think of God as sovereign and worship as a service of coronation with us bowing down before God upon his throne.

Of course it's also true that God seems to be the most reluctant one in ancient Israel to appoint the nation's first king. For years the people lived without monarchy and only seemed to have adopted it on the basis that as neighbouring nations had one why shouldn't they too?

The prophet Samuel tries, on God's behalf, to talk them out of it yet they persist and Saul is anointed the first monarch.

Although his reign ended in disarray it's Israel's second King, David, who came to represent the golden age of Monarchy. After him Israel's kings regularly abused their power and eventually the nation was divided into two kingdoms, north and south. Monarchy for Israel was nothing short of a disaster and in the grand scheme of things it was a short lived experiment that has never been revived.

Throughout this time there is this idea that kings will fight, not just defensively but also to gain new territory and that even God, as the supreme King, will crush the nation's enemies.

Maybe the idea of a territorial God as King is a dubious metaphor at best, a broken one at worst. It's certainly one that needs to be used carefully.

Go to the Passover Meal held in our church hall by members of the South Bucks Liberal Jewish congregation and you won't sing of a Kingly God rejoicing that, come the Exodus, the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea pursuing the fleeing Israelites. Instead this congregation has rewritten that prayer in the Haggadah, the Passover liturgy, so that it now talks of a compassionate God mourning the loss of so many Egyptian lives.

So what of the idea of Jesus as a king?

In today's gospel, set for a day that some in The Church call 'Christ the King Sunday' the religious authorities haven't got enough on Jesus that would merit a death warrant, so they pin on him this idea that he is going around calling himself 'The King of the Jews'.

Rome didn't much care about Messiahs because that was a religious title, open to interpretation. But they cared very much about people calling themselves 'kings'. That was subversive language and viewed as a direct threat to Caesar's place in the Empire. Rome tolerated some indigenous monarchies, like that of Herod's, but only if they controlled the strings of these puppet kings.

If Jesus had gone around proclaiming he was some quasi alternative sovereign, then in the eyes of the greatest empire on earth he was a criminal and that charge would be fixed to his execution cross as a warning to other would be home grown monarchs to give up searching for a crown. This empire only had room for one throne and it was to be found in a palace in Rome.

That day, at his Jerusalem headquarters, Pilate struggles to understand a Jesus who refuses to fit into the roles assigned to him by others.

To be a King of the Jews around AD 30 was to stand against the Romans, to denounce occupation and to campaign for liberation and independence. It's a political agenda for the medium term that would totally consume those working for its completion.

Pilate is like a dog with a bone and won't let Jesus off the hook. Let's pick up their dialogue at verse 37: You are a king then, Pilate asked. Jesus answered: 'King is your word'.

In John 18 Jesus doesn't take this word king and make it his own, instead he distances himself from its usage. 'King Jesus' isn't him – and he's not 'The King of the Jews' in this socio-political sense.

In this, act two of the Good Friday narrative, truth becomes an early victim as people foist on to Jesus their own agendas and make him something he wasn't. So, to some he was too much of a king whilst to others he wasn't regal enough.

Maybe we've been doing that ever since? Making Jesus into what we want him to be rather letting him be the ground breaking, radical person he was. Instead he becomes the Jesus who supports our causes, fits in with our ideas and promotes our prejudices.

The Jesus of today's gospel looks Pilate in the eyes and simply says: 'King – that's your word not mine'.

He also says: My kingdom is not of this world...

So, it looks as if, even if Jesus doesn't want to wear a crown he is much more comfortable about talking of a 'kingdom'.

Yet we surely have to be careful here not to misunderstand Jesus.

In saying: My kingdom is not of this world, is he suggesting God's way is all about the next world, heaven – rather than this one, earth?

Is he hinting that God is only concerned about ethereal and 'spiritual' matters, not down to earth, messy problems?

Well, if that were to be the case then all of Jesus' teaching about us being 'salt and light' – about getting stuck in and becoming an integral part of any society so that we might season life here and there with God's goodness – then all this teaching would be redundant.

If that were the case, that God's kingdom was all about tomorrow instead of today, then the example of Jesus' actions would be redundant too. This is the Jesus who didn't pass by on the other side but got involved exactly where people were – whether they were outcasts from a village with dreaded skin diseases or a woman at the well ashamed of her past. In fact, Jesus regularly tells the crowd that the Kingdom was already here, among them right now.

No, surely this saying in John that 'My kingdom is not of this world' has to be understood in the immediate context of the Roman Imperial idea that one nation could occupy another and force a whole race into submission.

Rome had a monarch and Rome had a 'kingdom idea' – all must bow to Caesar, there would be a peace, but it had a price, a forced allegiance to the imperial emperor.

That kind of oppression, says Jesus, is never the way of a loving and just God. Hence his one liner: My kingdom is not of this world. In other words, God is simply not that kind of king.

So what does this different kind of kingship look like that Jesus talks of in today's reading?

I think it's the idea of an 'alongside' God. This is a king who shares life with his people, lives among them, experiences their ups and downs and stays faithful beside them no matter what.

Perhaps this was the best ideal of Ancient Near Eastern Monarchy. Certainly the Jewish scriptures extol the virtues of rulers who provide justice for all their subjects and of leaders who stand up for the poor.

Maybe that's the reason so many Psalmists picture God as this good King.

Yet, all too easily even sovereigns as good as David misuse their power, in his case taking another man's wife while her husband was away on active service at the front.

We may buy into the notion of God as King because we want an 'almighty' and 'powerful' God. One who makes everything right and give us a victory.

Yet, again and again our experience is that faith doesn't bring such easy victories. Suffering remains the norm of life, death is part of all living and struggle isn't far from anyone's door.

So can we still talk of God as King?

Well, we have just been commemorating the end of the first war. A war that basically no one alive personally remembers.

That's not the case with the second. Many still remember the presence of George the Sixth and Queen Elizabeth, who became the Queen Mother, in those days.

When the Queen's mother was asked if she would go to Canada with the princesses, she famously said: I won't leave without the King and the King will never leave.

So, this famously shy man, George the Sixth, stayed with his people and visited the East End when it was blitzed. He couldn't stop the war, but he could share it with his people. He could stand alongside them in the bleakest of times and in doing so give encouragement, stability and hope.

God, I believe, never wants that person you loved to die, or that nation you have prayed for to descend into civil war. God doesn't want one street kid to struggle without food or education. But those things happen in our world.

God doesn't cause the suffering, but alongside us – as the Servant King, he shares it.

It's significant that today's interrogation by Pilate of Jesus about whether he is The King of the Jews is set in the context of Christ's passion – his suffering which leads to Good Friday and the Cross.

In this sense, says Jesus, my arrest and crucifixion will be pointers to a greater truth. That's what Jesus said he had come to do, to point us to truth, and it's the truth about God, embodied in Jesus's teaching and living and perhaps shown supremely in his dying.

I wonder if Pilate's idea of kingship involved wearing a crown of thorns and whilst dying upon a cross uttering words of forgiveness?

It's the paradox contained in those lines from The Servant King: Hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered.

It is, perhaps, all too easy for us to pass quickly over the crucifixion and hurry on to the resurrection with the idea that it was there, outside an empty tomb, that the identity of Jesus was fully and definitively restored.

Yet, wouldn't that be something of a denial on the same scale as Peter's. For surely, we haven't known this Jesus if we have not accepted the truth his life and death presents. For this is the 'alongside God'. Of course, Easter Day brings us so much hope and joy, but the cross is not away with by the resurrection. For, the cross displays the depth and essence of God's love and forgiveness. It's whilst wearing a crown of thorns that we encounter the Christlike God whose forgiveness is inexhaustible and whose love is unending.

It's a different kind of majesty.... and it's the essence of the truth Jesus brings us in both his living and his dying. The cross shows us Jesus' real self is his real self.

May these kingly virtues of service and faithfulness be part of our identity too – in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.