

Trinity 2 10 June 2018

In the two books of Samuel and the two books of Kings a broken nation is looking back over 500 years of history and chronicling where it all went wrong. The story ends in 2 Kings 23-5 with King Jehoiakin reigning 11 years in Jerusalem and a withering assessment by the chronicler: 'He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as all his ancestors had done'. (23.37) Judgement comes in the form of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who with his armies lays siege to Jerusalem and then breaches the walls, enters the city, burns the Temple, the king's palace, lays waste and removes all the sacred objects and the king's treasures and, together with all the leading citizens, takes them back to Babylon.

We're talking 6th century BC when Judaism and the Jewish nation regrouped, re-pented, rethought, reviewed its history in the light of its holy calling and rued its follies and unfaithfulness. 'By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down: yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.' They did not just weep when they sat down – they wrote and put together much of what we now know as the Old Testament. And just as the history books of the New Testament, the gospels and Acts, end in Acts 28 in Rome, which one of the New Testament writers called Babylon the Great, a new Babylon if you like, so the history books of the Old Testament end in the old Babylon, the capital of the vast imperial power of their day.

The writer of Samuel and Kings looks back over 400 years of kingship and sees a chronicle of faithlessness – a succession of kings who forsook their loyalty to the God of Israel and set up temples and shrines to other gods, to the gods of the surrounding peoples, the thunderous and ruthless male Baals and the sexually promiscuous female Asherahs and Astartes. And there was a litany of other complaints against the king: forcible conscription, slave labour, seizure of land, exorbitant taxation. 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you' says Samuel to the people. Don't say I didn't warn you.

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.'

Samuel was a prophet and alongside the history of the kings was a prophetic tradition that was highly critical of the ways of the kings, from Elijah in the 9th century BC to Micah in the 8th (who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem) to Jeremiah in the 7th who lived in the times of Jerusalem's end, who saw it all coming and was fiercely persecuted for doing so.

With a chronicle that is so anti the kings and kingship, you might expect that the end of the story would be the final destruction of the kingship and the last king and a great I TOLD YOU SO writ large, but it doesn't. Here is the end of the story:

27 In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; 28 he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. 29 So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king's presence. 30 For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived.

The end of the story is not a defeated and dead king but one who as it were rises up again. If I've got my maths right he has been in the dungeon for 26 years. He has served what we would now call a life sentence, but ends up in the most honoured seat at the king's table.

And there we leave it, a kingship that has finally reached a place of dignity and honour having been refined by a period of suffering. And that of course was the story of the whole Jewish people in

exile: a time of suffering and imprisonment, of national repentance, re-thinking, re-reading their history in the light of their divine calling and their often failure to live up to that calling. So, yes they blamed their kings, but they also saw that the anointed king, a sacred as well as a political figure, was a symbol and representative of them all. And though Jerusalem and the Temple was rebuilt, the priesthood restored and Judaism renewed, for over 500 years they yearned again for a king to govern them but were never given one, so that their yearnings became, if you like, spiritualised into a sort of heavenly king that one might have wondered would ever be able to touch the realities of solid earth.

Well, you know what happened next, and that means for us as Christians we have our hearts set on another kingdom not of this earth and of a king who won his crown through taking upon himself the sins of all past and would-be kings, and everyone else too, and entered the depths of suffering for the redemption not just of his own country but of the whole world, not just of one local history, but of all history.

But the nations that came to look to him as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, also had kings that reigned over them and as they received the Bible as their sacred text and inspiration so they adopted the bible's ways of inaugurating kings – they adopted anointing, the use of holy oil to confer the charism of kingship and the grace of the Holy Spirit to live and perform their sacred role. I have been reading this book over the past few weeks – ('England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225'). On the cover is a portrait of a king. It is from the 12th century and could be Henry II or Richard the Lionheart with his appearance, his vesture, his crown and his demeanour. But it's not. It's from an illustration from the Winchester Bible in 1 Samuel – this is the first king of Israel, Saul.

For good or ill our royal line has been modelled on the kings of the Old Testament. To be honest, most of their stories are as depressing in our chronicles as were those recorded in the books of Samuel and Kings. And there were those in our history who thought we'd be better off without a king or queen. We even tried it for about 11 years and it wasn't a great success. We have since evolved a system that has taken away from the monarch all the things that we used to blame them for – taxation, running government and the military – and we have left them with the symbolic, representative function but also a sacred one. Our own Queen, we know, is deeply aware that she has been anointed and thus bears both a divine grace and a divine responsibility in the exercise of her office. Her reign has not all been plain sailing from its beginning. She did not want to be Queen but was thrust into it because of the early death of her father – who also didn't want to be King but was thrust into it because of the abdication of his brother. She holds before her the pattern and example of the king of kings and Lord of Lords, the one who showed that majesty is demonstrated by humble service and the ultimate crown is only won through suffering and adversity. 'God save the Queen' we continue to pray; the perils and dangers facing her may in some ways be rather different from those that faced King Saul or Richard I but at root they are the same and are no less real or dangerous. So on this Trooping the Colour weekend we say, officially, 'Happy birthday, Ma'm' and may God continue to guide, inspire and strengthen you. Amen.