

C Christ the King 24 November 2019 St. Andrew's Chesterton

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

In nomine...

Christ is my King. Is he yours?

The Royals aren't getting a particularly good press at the moment. Certainly not the prince who shares the name of the patron saint of this church. It's probably not very easy being a Royal, if we're charitable about it. There are so many ideals and expectations around a public role. How on earth can they possibly hope to live up to them?

That's what Jeremiah, the prophet, is talking about in our first reading today. Now, let's set the historical scene. The Israelites went for ages without a king – they had Judges instead. Those who delivered justice were in charge. Women, men, valiant warriors, cunning leaders, variously good and faithful. Bear with the backstory... One of these judges, Gideon – also called Jerubbaal in the way of confusing ancient texts – Gideon *aka* Jerubbaal got a bit hoity toity and nearly got made a King. He managed to avoid being made a king in the end, and instead he told a great story about trees (which you'll find in Judges chapter 9). More of that later.

Something similar happened a bit later in the Israelites' history... They starting asking the great holy man, Samuel, to give them a king. They were looking at their powerful neighbours: the grandeur and power of their kings. They wanted a king too. Samuel tried to warn them against it – that's a story you find in I Samuel 8. Samuel sensibly points out that kings risk being greedy and self-obsessed. But they don't listen. So Samuel ends up anointing Saul.

Saul is therefore the first King of Israel. But he's a let-down, and David takes his place (that's the very short version. Read I Samuel).

Now David is the young lad who kills the Philistine Goliath; David is celebrated for being a great warrior; David is a handsome, "ruddy-cheeked" boy; David is

a gifted musician and many of the Psalms are listed as his (whether or not he wrote them we cannot know, but the point is that his is the name associated with the Psalms and all their prayer and praise). David is also an adulterer (remember Bathsheba? 2 Samuel 11) and David does get things wrong. But in general, he is remembered in Israelite history as the great King, the archetype of what a King should look like, how he should behave. (He does after all know when he's got something wrong, and he gets very sorry about it).

David is the King *par excellence*, the king whose reign is looked back upon as a glorious time, when all Israel – the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah - was united under the one great King.

A great King who used to be a shepherd boy.

So – Jeremiah. In today's prophecy, the image of shepherd stands for king. This would have been very clear in Jeremiah's time, the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of exile, because in the final words of our reading, the name of the good projected king is "The LORD is our Righteousness", *Yahweh šedek*. This is a variant on the name Zedekiah - *šedek Yah* – which just happens to be the name of the king of Judah, the southern kingdom, who had already been placed on the throne by Babylonians as a puppet king ten years previously. His failings led to the complete fall of Jerusalem in 586BC, when most of the educated classes of Jerusalem went into exile in Babylon. Not Jeremiah though – because he'd upset the powers-that-be by his prophesying (surprising that) – he had been thrown into jail just before the Babylonian invasion, and that had meant he was left behind in Jerusalem when most of the people had been shipped off.

So Jeremiah speaks God's lament of the bad shepherds, or kings, who have been letting down his flock, his people. The Kings who don't live up to David's ideal.

Zedekiah is not the only play on words we get here. Unseemingly as it is, the verb "shepherd", "pasture" (whence our word "pastor") in Hebrew is too close for comfort to the word for "bad" or "evil". They're different of course – but when you get both in the same verse – v. 2 – in Hebrew, you notice it. These shepherding people "*ro'im*" have done evil "*ro'a*". There's yet another

word play – Hebrew has just one word *paqad* which the translation we’re using today likewise just translates with “attend to” – which has both pastoral but also sinister overtones. Normally a caring word, it can also be about meting out justice and righteousness. The bad shepherd, the bad king, gets his comeuppance. (Isn’t Hebrew fun?)

Now there’s space for a new king, a good king, an ideal king. Verse 5, now God can raise up a righteous branch for King David, that epitome of kingship. The Davidic line in these last kings has become like a tree that was cut down, leaving only a stump. Jeremiah is prophesying that nevertheless the best-ever king will come from this good stock. We’ll sing in Advent of the “rod of Jesse”, and of course Jesse was David’s father. At Christmas we hear that Jesus is of the House and Lineage of David. As Christians we can see that Jesus comes – like “The LORD is our Righteousness” – to be not just a King like David was, but more perfectly kingly. Perfectly wise, perfectly just, perfectly righteous.

The LORD is our Righteousness. And Christ is our King.

But it’s a devastatingly arresting kingship that Jesus will inhabit on the cross. For that will be his throne. Where the kings of this earth would have crowns of precious metal and jewels, Jesus has a crown of thorns. Where the royals that we might think of are served rich wine, Jesus is served vinegar on a stick, and his own blood becomes a richer wine than any that could be served at an earthly banquet. The inscription above him on the cross – normally the charge on which a criminal was put to death – “This is the King of the Jews”. And, in one of the oddly rare moments when the Synoptic Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke all are exactly in line with one another, the detail “they cast lots to divide his clothing” is taken from Psalm 22, verse 18.

A Davidic psalm. Which, in Biblical Hebrew, begins with the words “Eli, eli, azabtani?” My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Heard that – or something very similar – before?

David was the best king the Israelites could picture in their mind’s eye. Jesus’ kingship is mind-blowing.

So that's where the back-story comes in. Israelites had a complex relationship with kingship. It became the be-all and end-all. A be-all and end-all that, on the festival of Christ the King, heralds Advent, and its double themes - not only of getting ready for the coming of Jesus at Christmas (complete with both shepherds and kings); but also the Advent theme of the *second* coming of Christ our Saviour. The LORD our Righteousness.

Now just in case some of you prefer Church History to detailed Hebrew exegesis, this Feast of Christ the King was established by Pope Pius IX in the encyclical *Quas Primas* of 1925. Canon Angela Tilby has described the feastday as

a counterblast to secularism and fascism. It was meant to bring confidence to a Church that was beleaguered, and to send a signal to aspiring European politicians that the Church was still a forceful presence in society.

That power is what was brought out in our second reading today, the Letter to the Colossians. It's a literally *dynamic* reading, where the joy at recognising this most perfect power in Christ spills out into a hymn of praise (because that's what verses 15-20 are) describing the God and King we worship.

Is Christ your King? He is mine. And his power and kingship sometimes fill me with unexpected and overflowing strength. Not all the time, mind, because I'm human, and other things get in the way all too often. But there are times when I can move from studying the Bible, thinking about the things of God in an abstract way, to wanting to sing of him: when the head stuff changes my heart. Christ is my King. And let's face it, we all need strength from time to time. More often than not, really.

Just a last thought now from your Diocesan Director of Ordinands and Vocations. Right at the start of this sermon *three hours ago you're probably thinking* I mentioned Gideon *aka* Jerubbaal who told a great story about trees (Judges 9) to persuade the Israelites not to make him a king. You may know it. The olive tree could not be persuaded to be king because his calling was to make rich olive oil. The fig tree could not be persuaded to be king because his calling was to grow sweet delicious fruit. The vine could not be persuaded to

be king because his calling was to make cheering wine. It was only the thorny
bramble that agreed – thorns which find an echo in Christ's crown.

The noble olive and fig trees, and the vine, had their callings. Callings to serve;
callings to know their true place, with honour. Righteousness is about right
relationship: to know how we stand with people, with the world, with God
and Jesus Christ. That's why the hymn in Colossians ends with words about
reconciliation, getting back into right relationship. And where we look to a
God who is King, we are drawn to look up to him, to see ourselves in right
perspective with such greatness. The LORD *is our* Righteousness.

How will each of you fulfil *your* primary calling, to be in right relationship with
God, to serve our Lord?

How is Christ *your* King?