

Jeremiah 23. 1-6

Luke 1:68-79

Colossians 1. 11-20

Luke 23. 33-43

It seemed that our prayers were answered as a result of us all singing “long to reign over us” - in schools, and public gatherings of all kinds, picture theatres and official events. “Long to reign over us, God save the Queen.”

We are making a transition from one monarch to another in these last months; something which most of us have no experience of. Whether we might support the idea of a British monarch being our head of state or are avowed republicans, we are in a state of transition as to the kind of figure-head we have in our country. I still can't get used to the idea of this person called King Charles – having become so used to Charles public persona as prince. I also can't get used to the title, because when I hear the title king Charles, my mind wants to complete the name – King Charles spaniel. I find it difficult to take the title seriously. King Charles spaniel. It's one of those names where I think Births Deaths and Marriages should have sent the proposed name back to the parents – can do better. Try again. The child won't thank you for this name.

Through the Queen's reign we have lived through a period of peculiar stability. I have a sense that the longing, the expectation created in me as a child, that a long reign over us would somehow bring about an orderly progress to our collective national lives. It's not so much that the Queen personally achieved these things for us but somehow she was symbol of our collective will. There is something about how the monarch embodies something on behalf of a people – in this sense the Queen did perform a collective sacred task.

As we mark the end of the church year today we mark the day with the title of Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ. It's not a very long-established festival in the church, being introduced by the Roman Catholic church only in 1925 – maybe in our own, certainly in many of our parents' lifetimes. It was just three years since the scourge of Mussolini's fascist regime had taken the Italian peninsular in its grip in 1922 and the Italian king had become all but powerless. AT this point in time Europe had been undergoing 140 years of political turmoil – from the French Revolution and Louis XIV's head being chopped off, to multiple revolutions across the 19th century, the formation of what we know as the states of Italy and Germany, previously loosely aligned states, movements for universal suffrage, to the carnage of WWI and the collapse of monarchies all across Europe, the Russian Revolution and the turmoil that it brought. In some ways the beheading of Louis XIV in 1793 and the execution of Czar Nicholas II in 1918 bracket a 125-year period of immense political turmoil and change.

[story about Chinese premier and French Revolution] When asked about the influence of the French Revolution, the late premier Zhou Enlai is reputed to have said: 'Too early to say.'

In establishing the Feast of Christ the King, it was as though the church rightly began the process of uncoupling the church from the state power structures in the places it found itself. It was the beginning of the end of Christendom – that compact between church and state where the two were often hand in glove and secular power was too-often construed as divinely ordained power. It was the end of that period when the church too often rode on the coattails of secular power,

being part of the colonisation of vast tracts of the globe; a project to evangelise and convert in the name of the Prince of Peace, too often, though, tainted by association with political and military forces. This might seem a long time ago but we are still in this transition – some of us struggling to slough off the assumptions and impacts of that legacy. In truth most of our parent's lives were formed in this tumult in one way or another.

As the church began to symbolically uncouple itself from the legacy of Christendom but still affirm some notion of Godly rule, it needed to look again at our scriptures and the images of kingship in them. There is not just one model here and we need to ask ourselves when thinking about this, how do we read, how do we make sense of the practice of kingship through Israel's history, and especially through the Gospels, which are overshadowed by the reign of Caesar Augustus and his Jewish puppet king Herod?

One of the images which the gospels present us with is that of the good shepherd, from John's Gospel. *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

The image of the good shepherd is an echo of what we have heard today from the prophet Jeremiah: *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you.*

Probably all of us were raised with the notion that religion and politics should be kept apart. Indeed the injunction – whatever you do dear don't mention sex, religion or politics – took root in most of us, to the extent that we are socially retarded when it comes to discussing these things. I went to a seminar on Public theology at the CTM this week and it felt like we were babes – not really knowing how to engage with respect and integrity in our society when too much religious dialogue is either deceptive or a process of shouting at each other through the media. It was a good conversation.

We cannot ignore the fact that the scriptures are inherently political. This condemnation by the divine voice, through the prophet Jeremiah, is concerned for the welfare of the polis, ancient Greek for the city; concerned for the wellbeing of the city. Jesus' ministry is always toward those people who have been abandoned or suppressed by those in power, the woeful leaders of the polis who destroy and scatter the sheep. This concern for the welfare of the people is ultimately a political one. Zechariah's hymn of praise is thanks for liberation from forces which have oppressed Israel:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

And Luke's account of those who are gathered at the place of The Skull to witness Jesus' execution reflect this same cross-section of people: the people – those towards whom Jesus' heart was turned, stand by watching – taking it all in; the leaders – both religious and political mock him; as do the soldiers, doers of dirty deeds on behalf of the regime: *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*

The question is an echo of the questions the devil puts to Jesus in the tempting in the wilderness: *If you are ...?* The question always taunts with an assumption that to be of God is to be powerful and to not be vulnerable to the fragility of being human. As the leaders do, so the soldiers and then the criminal on the cross with Jesus taunt him; they expect he will do something that beams him up, out of, away from this most ghastly of human situations. *Save yourself; and us!* Luke focusses the question for us: what kind of saviour Jesus will be? What kind of coronation is this. And what kind of paradise is it to which Jesus will welcome the other criminal?

This moment we have read from Luke in his gospel is in so many ways the high point of the gospel; the culmination of all that has gone before. The question *If you are ...* put to Jesus in the wilderness comes to completion here on the cross. And we are invited to wonder about all that has gone before and what that means for the vision of God that he has lived out. From the wilderness experience early in the gospel, Jesus goes to his home town synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This is a vision of the reign of God.

We go to the polls next Saturday, to participate in seeking a collective vision for this state. The outcome will determine the kind of rule we have; but we might ask ourselves what kind of reign do we want? In a way, in the notion of reign, we see the outcome, the outworking of a rule; the results, the flourishing or the diminishing. Our call as disciples of the crucified and risen one – Jesus – is to look for the reign of God, to lean forward anticipating it, with eyes straining to see its embodiment in people's lives. And we are called to embody and enact a movement towards this reign.

Maybe Paul sums up best for us the hope and confidence about this cosmic reign of lovingkindness that is within us:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Thanks be to God for this hope that is within us.

Andrew Boyle