

26 November 2023

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

We began the month with the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. Preparation for these celebrations had me looking once again at Bishop Tom Wright's excellent little book on the subject, *For All the Saints?*. In the last chapter of the book Wright takes a swipe at the feast of Christ the King, a relatively recent addition to the calendar. He complains that its placement on this, the last Sunday of the Christian year, the last Sunday before Advent, pulls the Church's year out of shape, devaluing other feasts and occasions.¹

The issue is that Christ the King doesn't really fit here in the sweep of the biblical story of God's dealings with humankind.

By placing the celebration of Christ the King at the end of the church year it can create the impression that Christ does not become King until the end of it all.

Coming at the end of the Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost narrative, it implies that this is an event still in the future; it creates the impression Christ is not yet King.

But the Bible teaches us that Jesus Christ is *already* King, and his kingship is made evident by his resurrection and at his ascension to the right hand of God the Father. When we pray, in the prayer that Jesus taught us, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven", the prayer is that God's kingdom will come on earth as *it is already* in heaven.

I understand Wright's argument; but I feel nevertheless there is great value in our having this celebration of Christ the King today, before we launch into Advent.

Firstly, as we prepare to enter into Advent the feast of Christ the King is a helpful reminder that Advent is not only about Christmas (Jesus' first advent, or coming, among humankind as the babe of Bethlehem). Reflection on Christ as King looks ahead to Jesus' *second* advent, at the end of the present age, when his kingly reign

¹ Wright, *For All the Saints?*, p.63. The full chapter runs pp.55-70

will indeed be made complete in earth as it is in heaven. That is why, despite the occasional complaints of parishioners in places I have served, I prefer not to have Christmas hymns and carols permeating our worship in the days leading up to Christmas. As familiar and well-loved as these hymns and carols are, and as important as Christmas's celebration of the Incarnation is, we miss a great deal if we fail to pay attention to the bigger story – that the one-time babe of Bethlehem is the King of Kings for all eternity.

Secondly, by extension, the celebration of Christ the King at *this* time of the year helps us Christians keep a proper perspective in the face of a consumerist culture that each year starts pushing its particular kind of celebration of Christmas (or something watered down to “Happy Holidays”) earlier and earlier. Our consumer culture is never going to celebrate Christ as King: a helpless baby is much less threatening than a King. And the mysterious details of his birth allow Jesus to be either further downplayed as mere myth or depicted in increasingly romantic manner in soft-focus and tinsel.

But what do we understand by a king anyway? Unlike many countries, we in Aotearoa New Zealand at least have a couple of kings we might look to to help us understand the concept: King Tuheitia and King Charles. But due to the extant constitutional and customary arrangements neither wields any significant power. And the vast majority of the media coverage about these kings tends to swing to extremes similar to those faced by the infant Jesus – irrelevancy or the cult of celebrity.

But we do well to remember that the idea of king was problematic for God's people in ancient time too. Our Old Testament readings over the past few months have traversed the history of God's people up to the time of Joshua and the first judges. And throughout that history they were led directly by God: God was their king. Then, against Samuel's advice, the people went on to demand a human king – so that they could be like other nations. From Saul onwards the monarchy was deeply ambiguous: ideally an instrument of God's care, provision and protection; but so often not aligned to the values and ways of God – as the phrase “he did evil in the eyes of the Lord” makes clear as it appears again and again like a litany throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles.

And so we come to Ezekiel's prophetic announcement that God himself will again lead his people. The language is of shepherding. Perhaps not the language we would associate with kingship of any kind, but the image had been applied to Israel's kings ever since the shepherd boy David was made king to succeed Saul. David, despite his various personal failings, was held out to be the model king, a good shepherd over the Israel flock.

Now Ezekiel, as mouthpiece of God, uses this shepherd metaphor to describe the repeated failure of Israel's rulers to rule after God's own heart, neglecting their duty to provide for and care for the neediest among the people, getting carried away with their own self-serving ends. God declares judgement on these failed shepherds of God's flock, and announces that God will once again rule his people.

But Ezekiel's announcement is at the same time puzzling: "I will be their shepherd", God declares on the one hand, but moments later says "I will be their God, and *David my servant* shall be their shepherd." ("David" here stands for the Messiah, the coming king inheriting God's promise of a king in David's line² – after all, David himself is long dead by this time). So who's going to rescue and judge this people? Is it God, the true king? Or is it David's heir, the Messiah?

As it turns out it will be both. God will perform the unique messianic task; the Messiah will accomplish that which, when all merely human kings have failed, only God can achieve.³ And in this God redeems his choice of the shepherd boy as a man after his own heart; the ambiguity found in the monarchy is surprisingly resolved finally when the sheep of Israel *reject* the shepherd and leave him to the wolves, with the contemptuous sign, "God's shepherd" ("King of the Jews"), nailed above his head. It is here at the Cross that we see what Ezekiel's vision was all about;⁴ it is here that we start to really appreciate the character and purpose of Christ's kingship.

² 1 Samuel 7:16

³ Wright, *Twelve*, p.126

⁴ Wright, *Twelve*, pp.126-127

Christmas – the celebration of the birth of a baby long ago in Bethlehem – feels safe, unthreatening, tame to those out for profit. Christ the King, if understood, is much more threatening. The message of Ezekiel, and the message of Jesus in Matthew 25, is of judgement against those who are self-serving, callous, uncaring.

(While in Matthew 25 it is the way the nations have treated those of the family of God that is subject to judgement, we should appreciate that the application of this standard to them only makes sense if it is the standard that also applies to the family of God.)

We might squirm about the idea of judgement. While we might have no difficulty judging the performance of leaders against the high standards and results we expect, while we might have few qualms about judging those we know who have failed us personally, we feel vulnerable to the idea of judgement as applied by God to ourselves and to those we love. We evaluate ourselves and our loved ones alongside the apparent criteria, find ourselves coming up short of these exacting standards in some way, and imagine the dreadful consequences ... so we shy away from the idea. Surely being cast into eternal punishment can't be *our* ultimate end! So we give up on the whole idea of judgement as if it were a viewpoint hanging on from an earlier and more violent age.

But really we should rejoice! We rejoice first in the gift of grace in the cross through which we find that Christ has borne in himself the fatal consequences of all our rebellion. This self-giving is the pinnacle of the remarkable nature of Christ's kingship.

And we should rejoice too because judgement means that sorting out of the world, the putting of the world to rights, the end of the reign of evil. Judgement is part and parcel of the kingly reign of God which in ensures all really get what they truly need: care, protection, restoration, provision, freedom, peace, love ...

In Ephesians, as so often in Paul's letters, there seems to be sudden movement from small local or personal matters, sometimes even mundane concerns, to great cosmic truths.⁵ In the piece from Ephesians 1 that comprises our Epistle reading

⁵ This section inspired by Coffman, "Commentary"

today we start with the personal – Paul giving thanks for the faith of the people he’s writing to, and talking of how he prays for them – and then suddenly he sweeps upwards and outwards in this great declaration of the power and purpose of God as he talks of

... the power at work in the king when God raised him from the dead and sat him at his right hand in the heavenly places, above all rule and authority and power and lordship, and above every name that gets itself talked about, both in the present age and in the age to come. Yes: God has ‘put all things under his feet’, and has given him to the church as the head over all. The church is his body; it is the fullness of the one who fills all in all.⁶

This is Christ the King talk!

Paul talks of his prayer for this little church community and then expounds Christ as King.

This kind of linking of local and everyday concerns to cosmic and eternal realities is a reminder that our understanding of the big picture should inform how we live now. The fact of Christ’s kingly authority over all things should inspire and guide how we live from day to day, in all facets of our life. Because if Christ truly is King of Kings, ruling all of creation on behalf of (and as) the Creator, then all of it comes under his interest, concern and loving care.

Christ the King Sunday is a negation of all earthly rulers. It is the assertion that faith in Jesus and love towards all the saints triumphs over the naked power of governments, the indifference of the comfortable, the self-interest of “fat cats”, the manipulation and lies of marketers. Christ the King Sunday is the proclamation that our local acts of faith and love are rooted in cosmic certainty.⁷

It is for this reason that we should be stirred up – every day, but today especially as we prepare to enter the season of Advent – stirred up to live by the values of the King of Kings rather than the values of the world around us.

⁶ Ephesians 1:20-23, translation of Tom Wright in *Paul* p.14

⁷ Coffman, “Commentary”, adapted

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people, that, richly bearing the fruit of good works, they may by you be richly rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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