

Sunday 20th November 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #10 ‘The Servant King’ (Luke 23:33-43)

We human beings have an ambiguous relationship with authority. On the one hand, we have a basic tendency to resent it: there’s something inside us that doesn’t like being told what to do, and as General Hopper puts it brilliantly in the great film ‘A bug’s life’: ‘The first rule of leadership – everything is your fault.’ Ironically this distrust of leadership often extends to leaders themselves: beware the leader who seeks power because other leaders are hopeless and only they can lead everyone properly! (Sure we’ve all met one or two like that!)

On the other hand, there’s also something in human beings which instinctively needs leaders. Leadership is described as a spiritual gift in the New Testament and St Paul recognises that, at its basic level, the principle of leadership is God-given. However badly it gets corrupted and abused by our human nature, **leadership began as God’s idea.**

That said, God is also very candid with his people about how easily human leadership does indeed get corrupted and end up being oppressive. One of my favourite passages in the Old Testament comes in 1 Samuel chapter 8. In its early history, the nation of Israel had no human ruler. It was a theocracy: God was the monarch, and the only humans given authority were leaders of worship – in other words, who enabled people to engage with the only ruler, God himself. After the chaos of the season of Judges, and the restoration of some sort of order and obedience by the prophet Samuel, it goes wrong again: Samuel’s sons are corrupt, so the people demand a different solution.

‘Give us a king!’ they cry – and their reason is interesting: ‘all the other nations have a king.’ It sounds like the collective whine of a spoilt child missing out on the latest fad: ‘*Everyone else* has a king – we want one too!’ At this point, Samuel and God have a tete-a-tete, and God admits to Samuel: they’re not rejecting you, they’re rejecting me. Remember, God was the king at the time.

So Samuel tells the people: be careful what you wish for. If you get a human king, this is what will happen: your men will be conscripted for the army, your women will be forced into the royal household, your produce will be heavily taxed – is that what you really want? But the people don’t listen: ‘we want a king to lead us out into battle.’ Never mind the day-to-day misery, we want a figurehead to posture on the world stage with!

It’s a remarkably perceptive passage. **Fast forward more than 3,000 years and nothing has really changed.** It is the nature of human monarchy to accumulate wealth and power – and sadly all too often this becomes an end in itself – the nation exists to prop up the monarchy and not the other way round. That was the point Samuel made all those years ago to the people, and the evidence of history since then has done little to change it.

The world cup starts this weekend in Qatar, and while I was researching this talk I decided to take a look at how much modern day kings are worth. It turns out that the Emir of Qatar is worth about £1.5 billion, which only puts him tenth on the current list of wealthiest kings. Interestingly, our new King Charles would be third on this list at a cool £17 billion – except of course that the Crown Estate is donated to the country, rather than held personally, so he doesn’t appear of personal wealth. If you’re interested, second is the Sultan of Brunei and the richest of all is the King of Thailand with a net worth of approximately £30 billion – who knew?

I think one of the reasons the late Queen Elizabeth was so revered around the world was that her personal humility was so unusual. As the figures above attest, it's generally not what monarchs are known for. Back in 2009 I remember a hoo-hah in the press when pictures of the Queen's breakfast arrangements were leaked and splashed across the newspapers, alongside the general horror that the Queen uses old china which doesn't even match. This is something we should celebrate! But it's that old whine of the people of Samuel's day repeating itself.

The reason I've spent the majority of my time introducing this subject is to set the context for what we celebrate today. The Sunday before Advent is known in the traditional church calendar as the feast of Christ the King. But **what makes it so radical is when we see what kind of a king Jesus Christ was.** If we want to find the root of our late Queen's humility and servant heart, we have to go back to the original Servant King, Jesus himself. The idea of kingship as service and sacrifice didn't exist before Jesus – and yet Jesus insisted with his disciples: 'whoever wants to be great must be *servant* of all.'

Today's passage is the ultimate demonstration of what kingship meant for Jesus, what it cost Jesus. There's so much we could say, of course, about this most important of texts, much of which we'll say at Easter. But let's just notice today **the clash of ideas about kingship, even at the crucifixion.** It's studded throughout the text: v35 'if he is the Messiah, God's chosen one' v37 'If you are the King of the Jews....' v38 Pilate's wind-up notice above Jesus' cross 'This is the king of the Jews' v39 the criminal's insult 'Aren't you the Messiah...?'

What everyone gathered around the cross that day missed was that what Jesus was doing was **actually proving his true and divine kingship. It was because Jesus was the King of all kings that he stayed on the cross.** He was winning a victory for the world. The people were still stuck in the lie of Samuel's time a thousand years previously: they wanted a king to demonstrate his strength and save *himself*; Jesus the true king came to save *others*.

Only one person recognised Jesus for who he was: not the religious leaders, or the crowds, but a common thief, a criminal. 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your...' what? **Kingdom.** This was the moment Jesus assumed his rightful place: through wrongful arrest and illegal death, the author of life triumphed over humanity's greatest enemies: not other nations or human beings, but the things we've never been able to overcome: sin, Satan, sickness and death. What looked like defeat was the greatest victory.

Next week we begin the journey of Advent, and wonder again at God becoming flesh. But today, let's marvel at what this God-become-flesh went on to do. Christ the King changed the way we see leadership, and those who follow his path are called to do likewise. We may not be called to make the ultimate sacrifice, but **we too are called to a life of service and humility, imitating the Servant King.** Our path to greatness lies only through service – just as Jesus taught, and lived.

Like the thief, today we cry: 'Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And our loving King replies: 'I tell you truth, you will be with me in paradise.' May God grant us all grace to hold fast to this Servant King, and to model *his* way in our lives: this day, this week, this season.