

Sunday 14th May – Reflection: ‘Jesus King of kings’ (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

After the excitement of last weekend, we continue our coronation-themed series looking at the true King of kings. As we look back today with a few days’ perspective, I wonder what thoughts and images have lodged in your mind. Certainly the coronation service itself was a visual and sonic feast, from the costumes to the music, to the dignified drama of each part of the ceremony.

In my reflection last Sunday, we focused primarily on the first part of the service, especially the oaths King Charles made, and the persistent sense that, as an earthly ruler he remains subject and accountable to a greater King, the King of kings – the Lord Jesus Christ. The service itself was full of Scripture references which reinforced this, as well as a number of symbolic gestures, from Charles being welcomed by a choirboy (i.e. one of the most junior attendees), to kneeling before the Archbishop, and receiving a special bible on which he placed his hands to make the oaths.

Today, though, I want us to pause briefly to notice the regalia that formed the second part of the ceremony. It was quite a long-drawn out segment, as Charles was presented with quite a number of different items, each of which symbolised an element of his authority: first there were the spurs, then the sword, then the armills (i.e. bracelets), then the robe and stole (which is a kind of scarf), then the orb, the ring, the glove, the sceptre and rod, and finally the crown itself. If you put all the symbolism together, a comprehensive picture emerges of what the calling of a godly ruler should be: exercising justice with wisdom and mercy, using power to defend the needy, and living righteously.

I was particularly struck by what was said to the king as he was presented with the orb: ‘remember always the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.’ It’s a quotation from the book of Revelation, chapter 11; indeed, it’s a cry of triumph which resounds in heaven as Jesus is proclaimed the ultimate victor and the eternal king. And it is this moment which forms the culmination of our passage today, as **St Paul describes what the true reign and authority of Jesus looks like.**

He’s writing to the small church community in Corinth, which was riven by factions and lived in a very decadent city. The very name Corinth was slang in common Greek for moral decay. And alongside these lifestyle challenges they also faced doubts as to whether Christ really rose in bodily form from the dead. Was this Jesus really the Lord of life and death, of our lives and our destinies?

St Paul’s answer is an emphatic *yes* – our passage begins: ‘But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.’ (v20) As we reflect today on this passage in the light of last weekend’s events, the parallel I want to draw is that **this passage in Corinthians is also about a coronation, only this time it is the resurrection which represents Jesus’ crowning as the King of kings.**

St Paul says at the beginning of his letter to the Romans that Jesus ‘was appointed the Son of God in power *by his resurrection from the dead*’ (Romans 1:4). The resurrection is *the* moment when Jesus’ kingly power and authority is made manifest; it is also the moment when his victory over the forces which wage war against humanity is assured – as Paul says in our passage, ‘for as in Adam all die, so all in Christ will be made alive.’ (v22) Our enemies – sin and Satan, sickness, suffering and death – still cause us grief, but their power is now limited and will ultimately be defeated: ‘for he must reign,’ v25 says, ‘until he has put all his enemies under his feet.’

This passage is rich with references to other important texts in Scripture, especially in relation to what goes wrong at the start of the bible, when we chose to go our own way, to be our own rulers, to reject God's ultimate sovereign authority over our lives. 'For as in Adam all die...' And this striking image of Jesus' enemies being under his feet picks up the very first Messianic promise in Scripture, in Genesis 3:15, when God promises the serpent who had deceived Adam and Eve that one of their offspring would come and crush his head, while the serpent would bruise his heel. Jesus, it turns out, is the fulfilment of that promise, crushing the enemies of humanity under his feet. And he does it, of course, not through military power or violent oppression, but through his death and resurrection.

There's more, though: it's very interesting that Paul doesn't only talk about Christ's victory over these things, he also says this in v24: 'Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.' In other words, in eternity there will be no other human rulers, no monarchies or oligarchies, no other systems of authority, either earthly or spiritual. **There will be only one Lord, Jesus Christ,** himself subject to God the Father.

As we commemorated King Charles' coronation last weekend, and he was invested with authority to rule in this life, this passage is a healthy reminder that his authority lasts only for this life – indeed any human systems of power and authority will not just end in the world to come, they will be destroyed. It's not that human authority is wrong in itself, it's just that it will no longer be needed – the loving, life-giving, just and merciful rule of the Lord Almighty will be all we need to flourish for eternity. Indeed, the last chapter of the bible sees God appointing all redeemed humanity to rule in heaven under him (Revelation 22:3-5). Imagine that!

It's this reality that underpins the symbolism of the orb, to return to the regalia of last weekend. You probably noticed that the orb and sceptre both have crosses on top of them, and in fact the presentation of the orb was prefaced with these words: 'Receive this orb, *set under the cross...*' In other words, **all earthly authority sits under the rule and reign of Jesus Christ, whose ultimate symbol of authority is the most unlikely one of all:** a piece of equipment used for torture and execution – and yet which Jesus himself insists is the place where he is lifted up and glorified. His throne is two planks of wood. His robe are the folded graveclothes. His regalia are the scars in his hands and feet and side, captured in those fabulous words from the hymn: 'rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.'

And his coronation took place, not in an abbey but in a garden, by a tomb. The investiture was not by archbishops, lords and ladies, but two angels. The witnesses were not 2,000 assembled guests but 3 frightened women. And yet this coronation will endure for all eternity. 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet... and when he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be in all in all.'

'Remember always the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.' That may seem like big picture stuff, but it is the soundtrack to our every day. We live now in the reality of Christ's coronation, knowing that his reign is eternal, that nothing can separate us from his love, and that one day he will wipe every tear from our eyes. We live as subjects of the ultimate king – so, whatever you face today, may you find strength for your journey from the true King of kings. And he shall reign for ever and ever. Amen.