

Sunday 17th December – Third Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 40:12-26 ‘A word of authority’

In 1520 King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France met for an astonishingly extravagant festival. Designed to foster peace between the two nations, it was a demonstration of such power and wealth on the part of both kings, and was so spectacularly furnished with a custom built town of tents and even mock palaces outside Calais, that it became known as ‘The Field of the Cloth of Gold.’ Years in the planning by Cardinal Wolsey and others, up to 6,000 people formed the retinue for each king, for eighteen days of feasting, jousting, masquerades and high political intrigue.

It was the high watermark of the great mediaeval royal court – a symbol of the absolute power of both monarchs. And it reflected the way King Henry, ruled at home: Hampton Court Palace, his usual seat of government, was typically attended by up to 1,000 courtiers. Access to the king was strictly controlled. First there was the courtyard – then the Great Hall for more distinguished guests. From the Great Hall you entered the Guard Chamber – and finally, only the most elite or those with permission to conduct urgent business, would be allowed from the Guard Chamber into the Privy Chamber, where the King would be sat under a royal canopy.

To approach the king, you had at all times to face towards him (never turn your back on the monarch) and inch forward slowly, legs bent, head bowed in order to present your business to the king. Henry even changed the form of address – it was no longer simply ‘your grace’ or ‘your highness’, but from 1519 ‘your majesty’ – Emperor Charles V had recently adopted this form of address and Henry couldn’t bear to be outdone.

It's a striking scene, isn't? The great monarch, wielding absolute power. And I could have picked any number of great courts, from anywhere across the world over the last 3,000 years – from the early Chinese emperors of the Han dynasty or the great Pharaohs of Egypt like Tutankhamun, through Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, to perhaps the most extravagant court of them all – Louis XIV, the Sun King of France, and builder of the vast palace at Versailles.

And yet, as we turn to today’s passage, **here’s is God’s view of all of them: ‘He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.** No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.’

However magnificent they appear, however powerful or intimidating, the same end awaits them all. If it is true for all of us that you can’t take it with you when you go – then how much more true for the great and the powerful of this world. **However hard they try they cannot, in the end, take the glory that belongs to God alone.**

As we continue our series in this marvellous chapter, we’ve already looked at the first two sections, which have offered a word of comfort and a word of good news. Now the perspective changes, and God takes centre stage – if there were any doubt as to whether we can trust these messages of hope, then here’s our answer. **We can trust the one who makes them, because look at who this God is – look at his power and authority:** ‘Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?’ (v12) That’s quite a good start to today’s reading, isn’t it? It goes on: ‘Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in the balance?’

What sort of sacrifice could you make to this great ruler? (v16) 'Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.' Not even a whole country would be enough: 'Before him – [this great God] – all the nations are as nothing.'

And yet humanity still persists with trying to make images of the divine, little trinkets to worship. The closest this text comes to comedy is when it describes a craftsman trying to make an idol: 'a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold... they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.' Picture the scene of someone trying to balance this little figure hoping it doesn't just fall over – reminds me of our Christingle service last week, trying to find a little orange that would stay upright!

And the point is, these are the images of gods (small g) that much of humanity tries to worship. Compare that with the God described here (v22): 'He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth' – now *that's* a real royal court. In a totally inappropriate analogy, it reminds me of Crocodile Dundee when he meets the mugger in the film: 'You call that a knife... (pulls out enormous blade) now that's a knife.' Here's it's God saying to all the rulers, with puffed up notions of their magnificence: you call that a royal court...? Now *this* is a royal court...: 'He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in.'

And the point of all of this is simple: there is *no-one* like our God. Our God is greater, our God is stronger, this God is higher than any other. 'To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal,' says the Lord. And when this God speaks, he means business. **We can trust the word of this God:** 'Who can... instruct the Lord as his counsellor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way. Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path to understanding?' (vv13-14)

As we gaze out on a chaotic world, still marred and scarred by the ego of human rulers, how we need to hear this word again. Yes, they may have their seasons in the sun – but they go. They all do, they always do. The peace between Francis and Henry back in 1520 lasted just two years. And both Francis and Henry died in 1547 – Henry no longer as a glorious prince but as a brutal tyrant, whose population were desperate to see him go.

But the word of this God endures forever. A God who speaks comfort, good news – and has the authority to do so. This Advent, every Advent, every day in fact, we rest on this word of authority. The glory of the Lord has been revealed, and we have seen it.

And he shall reign for ever and ever. Amen. Hallelujah!