

Sermon for 20th November 2022 – Year C – Christ the King

Preached at St Michael the Archangel

Jeremiah 23:1-6; [Colossians 1:11-20]; Luke 23:33-43

It may not feel like it, but this is the last week of the year for the Church. Before the new year begins with Advent when we once again begin our vigil of waiting for the birth of Jesus, we end with the feast day of Christ the King, a celebration of Christ's role as Lord of all.

Three years ago, when today's readings last came up in our lectionary, we were in the middle of the 2019 general election campaign when political parties were all trying to persuade us that their leader should be given power over our lives. Three years on, and three prime ministers later, the political turmoil has hardly subsided, but if we feel any frustration with or perhaps resentment towards our leaders, we may find a ready friend in the words of Jeremiah the prophet.

“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 for your evil doings,” says the Lord.

Jeremiah was active in the last days of the kings of Judah, before the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem around 600 years before Jesus was born. His words are seen as a condemnation of the last two kings before the exile to Babylon – Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. It was typical in those days to refer to leaders as shepherds of the people, so Jeremiah's prophecies are intended to reflect God's disgust at the way these leaders have focused on enriching and protecting themselves, rather than serving, protecting and enacting justice for the people, and especially for the poor and oppressed.

We only have to go back one chapter to find out explicitly what these kings have done wrong. Jeremiah Chapter 22 verse 3 is directed at the king and says: “Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans and widows. Stop murdering the innocent!” He continues in verse 5: “If you refuse to pay attention to this warning, I swear by my own name, says the Lord, that this palace will become a pile of rubble”.

God, speaking through Jeremiah, is not blaming the people – the sheep of his pasture – for their own situation. He is blaming the ones who were supposed to be shepherds, the ones who had the power but chose to use it to enrich themselves. The ones who, according to chapter 22 verse 13, built a palace for themselves with forced labour, panelling it with fragrant cedar and painting it a lovely red.

Jeremiah’s words could be very blunt. No surprise the kings did not like him very much. Those of you who like homework might like to read Chapter 22 later when you get home and I’ll leave it to you to decide which modern leaders might need to hear a similar message.

But there’s more to Jeremiah’s words than simply a threat of destruction.

Through Jeremiah, God promises to do himself what these kings should have done. He promises to gather the remnant of the flock, and bring them back to the fold, where they shall be fruitful. He promises to raise up new shepherds who will be faithful, so that the people will no longer be fearful, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing.

And it’s in verse 6 that God promises a new king from the house of King David, who will rule wisely and bring justice and righteousness to the land. The Christian faith later came to regard this as pointing towards Jesus, and so we have this feast day to celebrate the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy...

But wait. Jesus was never a king, not in the sense that Jeremiah would have understood it, and probably not in the sense that his disciples would have expected it. In fact, his kingship looks little like any other leader you or I have ever known.

There is a 600 year leap between the Old Testament prophecies of Jeremiah to the Gospel story of Jesus' last moments on the cross. What a contrast! Was this the kind of kingship God was promising? A man dying in public humiliation having held no public office; a man mocked by the Roman oppressors, by his own people, even by one of the criminals being executed alongside him.

“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!”

“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

“He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God”.

This is a different kind of king. We look at the torture of an innocent man on the Cross and we too catch ourselves wishing he had chosen that moment to exercise his power. Imagine if the nails had popped out of his hands and feet and he'd floated down to the ground shining brilliant white like a movie superhero. Why not use all that divine power to force the world to be what it always should have been? I even find myself praying, “Lord, why did you let the evil win?” before I have time to remember the Resurrection yet to come.

King Jesus is a very different kind of king, who refuses to use power to help himself, but only to help others. Even on the Cross, he is still at work, forgiving the second criminal who recognises that Jesus' kingdom is not one of worldly power and asks to be remembered. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise”. What unspeakable joy these words must have brought to a dying man, a convicted and confessed thief. The last act of the weakening shepherd is to bring one final sheep back into the fold.

Is this kind of kingship challenging to us? Do we prefer our kings and leaders to be superheroes who seem to be defeated but return to smite the evildoers? Do we secretly want to judge whether other people are worthy of heaven, and get upset when unpleasant people like this criminal are let in? Perhaps we would prefer it if paradise were exclusively for the nice, clean, well-behaved people. But this is not how the kingdom of Love is.

The thief who repents on the Cross has no evidence that such a kingdom exists, has ever existed, or will ever exist, and yet in his most hopeless moment when all is lost, he is the one who recognises that Christ is, indeed a king – the king of our hearts – and by that recognition, he too is saved.