

The God of the Cross becomes King

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor
Christ the King—20 November 2016
Revd Dr Colin Dundon

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Introduction

So this is how it ends. This is how royalty ends; a guillotine, a chopping block, gunfire in a Russian forest, a cross or with the grandiose title of constitutional monarch.

In the ruins of an ancient Roman stable there is graffiti, a cross with the inscription that goes something like “Axemonos worships his King (God)”. That is how it ends.

Do you ever think how odd it is that we talk about royalty and kingship in an age of pluralist liberal democracy? What on earth are we doing? After all, kingship conjures up images of autocracy, no accountability, the freedom to use subjects' lives as cannon fodder, excess of all kinds; tyranny and serfdom in other words.

In the minds of westerners to speak of God as king is to invoke the horrors, the ghastly specter of theocracy. Imagine bumbling, venal and incompetent clergy governing the world as agents of the god they choose to worship. The modern western mind recoils.

Notice what is going on here. The term ‘kingship’ is loaded not only with theology but politics. The subject is about how the world will be governed and by whom. We have become used to the habit of mind that pulls such things apart.

On top of that we learn something countercultural. We have been brought up on the myth that history turned a great corner in the 17th Century and the age of enlightenment ushered in a new age of science technology philosophy and politics. The gloomy age of superstition and ignorance has gone. This is where history is meant to going.

However, Christianity tells a tale that says that the corner was turned in 30CE. It tells the story something like we have been reading in Luke. That story shows that Jesus and his story is the great turning point; the point that says this is where history is meant to be going, despite appearances. And the story tells us something very important about the God and Father of Jesus the Messiah. We learn that God is becoming king on earth as in heaven. That does sound like madness.

In response to that claim in our our western world Christianity is reduced from an eschatology to a religion; here is a story about a way of being spiritual, not of God becoming king. And that reduction muzzles the message that the Gospel writers like Luke were anxious to get across. So the message of Luke is neutralized to the realm of private spirituality and an escapist heaven. And God, like grandpa, is put in the attic out of mind and sight.

So I want to read the texts today and ask what is the story they tell.

The shepherd: Jeremiah 23.1-6

Remember the parable of the lost sheep in Luke? The shepherd goes looking for them. God goes looking for them. Grandpa God is not. God will attend to those shepherds who attack and abuse the flock. God will raise up shepherds who will truly shepherd. And there will be one great Kingly shepherd to rule them all, the Lord whose nature it is to put all things to rights.

God called Israel to be means of rescuing the world and its politics so that he might himself alone rescue the world by becoming Israel in Israel's Messiah.

Here is the first challenge to the enlightenment. God is not interested in religion but in where the world is going, whether it is governed in righteousness or not and what kind of shepherds will govern it.

The kingdoms totter: Psalm 46

But God is their hope. The kingdoms tear themselves to pieces. They are in uproar and they verge on the abyss of utter destruction.

Yet somewhere in all that din, when the supposed shepherds of humankind are spiraling out of control, driven by self aggrandisement and power, the word of God is heard and the earth melts, the bows are broken and spears shattered. Be grateful Grandpa is not in the attic.

God is the midst of his people through whom he plans to rescue the world from itself and its demons. A great river flows from the Presence. That presence cannot be moved because God cannot be moved. God's life is the life of the world.

God is the refuge of the world and its great joy. In the madness of world tumult there is only one way, "Be still, and know that I am God!"

That is not a religious direction but a political one. The only way to know the right is to listen. The only way to destroy the terror of war and fear is to listen to the voice of the true shepherd.

This is the king of the Jews: Luke 23.33-43

Where will we find this voice?

"When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left."

"This is the King of the Jews."

Here is where we must listen; here we will know God. This is the shepherd messiah of Jeremiah 23. Here is what the powers think of the word of God, the utterance of God: A man dying on a Roman cross. Here Jesus as the king of the Jews represents the great call and vocation of Israel; to be the people who listen to the shepherd God who puts things to rights and who suffer in that vocation. He is the bearer of Israel's vocation of suffering. This is Jesus' kingship.

What mad kingship is this? Not something we know or something we expect.

His kingship is the establishment of a universal healing sovereignty of peace and well-being but it comes at the cost of suffering and rejection by the powers. These powers believe that they have finally put God in his place, killed him and in so doing got rid of silly notions like righteousness and justice, equity and peace. They prefer instead to shake the universe with the violence displayed at the cross. Uproar and tumult, bows and spears are more to their taste. Being still is not. God is dead. And perhaps that is all that can be said.

The defeat of the powers: Colossians 1.11-20

"...he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything."

Be still and know that I am God. God is not dead and much more can be said. What did the psalmist say? "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, ..."

Paul knew that there was much more to be said. And he says it in the Colossians reading this morning. And this is Paul's version of "the streams that make glad the city of God." Jesus is the source of those streams of life (15-17).

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”

Christ is both the source of life and the goal of life because he is its creator. All creation is encompassed including the visible and invisible thrones and powers, dominions and rulers. He is also the sustainer of life. The world has not been left to its own devices and the predations of monarchs or democratic politicians that speak in innuendo and deceit. All things are for him and hold together because of him. Do not thank politicians when the world does not disintegrate under the weight of human madness and folly. Thank the Creator, sustainer Christ who holds all things together.

And this creating, sustaining Christ is the crucified firstborn from the dead. The cross and suffering bring about God’s peace and that promise is vindicated in the resurrection. The streams that make glad the city of God cannot be dammed. The power of life breaks the walls of death and life flows forever, and for all.

And the church? Well that is HIS body. That is the body that shares with Israel the vocation to rescue the world and its politics so that he becomes king. We, the church, share in the inheritance of the saints, that is, Israel. We share the Presence, the privilege of his glory and his rescue.

“He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

And our goal is to witness to the crucified and risen One who is king, who has broken the power of rag-tag opponents not through violence but through reconciliation on a cross. He brings reconciling forgiveness to play in the world to transform it.

And our goal is peace as God defines it; the well-being of the whole of the creation, including the material universe and the social order. God is not in the business of destroying the created order but bringing to its fullness of life.

And then our method is that of Christ: Worship or joyfully giving thanks and patient suffering for the reconciliation of the world. The sword and the bomb are not our business. Suffering and the worship of thanksgiving are our business, they are our precious assets.

Conclusion

The texts today will not allow us to escape into a remote heaven or private spirituality. There is no hope, no reconciliation in these. God is not in the enlightenment attic, out of sight and out of mind. Every time we lay hold on the Eucharist we take hold of the Presence of life for the whole creation.

This morning we are reminded who our King is; not a belligerent divisive nationalism or a violent overthrow of nations or some other ideology. Our creator reconciling King reaches out in peace to the raped material creation, the marginalized and all needing righteousness and justice, love and mercy.

We are his body.