

The King returns

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Second Sunday of Advent—4 December 2016
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Isaiah 11.1-10; Psalm 72.1-7, 18-21; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12

Introduction

One of the things the kids loved to do in Kenya when they were young was to drive to the coast to Mombasa for a holiday. It was even better when a couple of times we found ourselves behind the presidential entourage also on the way to Mombasa. It was a 500km+ drive from where we lived way outside Nairobi. So, to follow (at a distance, of course) a fast-moving group of vehicles with no obstacles on the road was great experience. Military and police outriders flanked the whole parade and cleared the road across the great savannah plains.

Hence the cry of the Baptist this morning,

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.”

John was the outrider, making sure the highway is wide open; nothing would stop the progress of the returning king. For what? This morning I want reflect on the Coming King using the passages we read.

New king for a new world : Isaiah 11.1-10

The prophets longed for a king to come. The beautiful passage we read this morning is the centerpiece of a long prophecy on just such a longing. It is a magnificent piece of poetry about what good governance is in answer to the deepest longings of the human heart.

Out of the felling of the Assyrian empire about 100 years later and the more devastatingly cutting down of the great tree of the Davidic kings a new branch will spring. And what a branch it will be.

David's kingdom may be a rump and the Assyrians may be in control with their mastery of new and violent technologies, but something will happen that will change everything.

Listen to the qualities of for governance that will emerge from the stump of Jesse, David:

In the Spirit, wisdom, understanding, capacity to give and receive counsel, and all done within the life of trusting God who guides his every move in the ways of justice and peace.

The poor and the meek receive equity and the justice that meets their needs not that of the rich and powerful. And violence will be long gone. The whole created order will live out a peaceful existence.

The reign of God in the socio-political order and in creation will experience something startlingly new.

My words cannot match Isaiah's. And the picture may seem like pie in the sky to the people of *real-politik*; such image making is always counter-intuitive. But always remember where the hard heads have led and are leading us.

A king for all people; the hope kept alive: Psalm 72.1-7,18-21

O for such a ruler. And the psalmist records for us how the dream was kept alive; at coronations. Given the behavior of most of Israel's rulers you can see why they prayed this way at the coronation.

Justice and righteousness, the key to God's character, were to be the means and goals of the reign of God's agent, the ruler. Only in justice and righteousness for all is the only base for human flourishing, not the GDP. I simply want to emphasise how the ancient people of God kept the dream alive hoping that this king would be the one to bring in God's good reign on earth. And the dream remained the same.

Even when this psalm was sung in the temple after all kings were abolished and banished to memory they clung to the vision that God would act in and through a ruler who would change politics from greed, power and violence to justice, righteousness and equity in which the poor and the needy would find succor.

That is how Israel worshipped.

The king returns : Matthew 3.1-12

That is why John is so important. The king returns. That is his most basic message. The King returns. God is on the move and will not be stopped, Romans or no Romans.

So well-known is the story of John the Baptist that we might quickly skim over it and park it alongside many other relics of long lost Sunday School stories.

! hope in this season with its occasions of madness you will remember that Christmas is but the prequel to the main event. Two of the Gospels, Mark and John, do not even bother with it. I know that it looms large in our imaginations and practices, and in the creeds and church life. But not in the Gospels.

John's appearing is where the story of the Return of the King really takes off. This story is full of potent symbols for any who will listen: wilderness, the prophetic voice, clothing, food, a royal highway, water, snakes, axe, and fire. No wonder Sunday schools love this stuff.

The proclamation of the highway is the announcement of the Return of the King. This is not the coming of the king, it is the return of the King. The quote from Isaiah 40 makes that clear. What they have been waiting for from the Assyrian invasion though the Babylonian invasion is on the way.

And the man who makes the announcement, by dress and diet, stands in the tradition of the great prophet Elijah. As in the ancient northern kingdom the Word of God comes in the Spirit with such force that people must pay attention. They may accept the Word with gladness or they mock and reject it. As with Elijah there is no neutrality.

The Good News is clear. The kingdom of heaven is near; it's on the royal road. God's empire with all its political and social consequences is around the corner. This empire promises healing, restoration forgiveness and peace.

And we need to be ready. That is why John parks himself in the wilderness. Not only is he out of reach of Jerusalem but even Herod Antipas will take time to find him. But most importantly in the imagination of Israel this is where God meets his people to become their redeemer and the sole ruler of their hearts and minds. The political elites like the ancient Pharaoh have no control here.

Were they ready for this royal entourage to arrive? Well, no. That is why John calls them to repentance. Notice what repentance is. It is a complete change of heart and mind so we can

be ready for the empire of God to take over the heart and mind. It is the doorway thought which the empire of God enters and transforms us. It is opening ourselves up to the agenda of God's rule: That stuff we have talked about often and I talked about this morning from the Psalm and Isaiah.

And they needed to affirm that in a public act that was very humiliating for some. After all, it was the act that gentiles had to undertake to become part of God's people. Were they Gentiles? NO. They were Abraham's offspring.

John won't wear that. Abraham's offspring must repent too. No ethnic advantage here. Don't come here trying to save your own skins so you can slide into some heaven or other. They were like snakes slithering from a bushfire heading for the water to save their own skins. They had no intention of changing anything.

They needed to repent of their spiritual pride and arrogance that led them to hate the stranger and oppress the poor and the thinking that thought that God's kingdom would come through violence.

This king on the highway comes with the long promised spirit who will transform everything. There is judgment too. After all, people do not easily and quietly give up power, and the right to be self-ruled, self-directed and selfish.

So we are reminded of the importance of repentance; not groveling abasement but the full recognition that when the King returns everything changes and we need to change with it. We need to be ready. We are people who recognize that the first step in spirituality is not coddling yourself in a warm blanket of spiritual chocolate but a hard-edged reality check about who is coming.

Isaiah, the psalmist and John point to the future, but as Paul reminds in the letter the Romans ...

The king has returned and blesses the world : Romans 15.4-13

The whole epistle explores how God has changed everything in Jesus the Messiah; the cross, in the resurrection and in the Spirit. It tells of how God has restored right relationships and brought justice to the world in Jesus.

Romans 15 contains part of his concluding remarks as he brings his argument and exposition to a close.

What God has done is to offer the world a way back to its unity under his rule of love and justice. That is the one voice of the whole creation that glorifies God's rule of love.

What God has done is to offer the world a word of welcome that becomes the Gospel word. Jesus' the Messiah's servant ministry to the ancient people of God explodes as the word of welcome to the whole world. That was the prophets' dream; that the whole world would find its true governance in the love of God and live out a life of rejoicing, of praise and thanksgiving.

Conclusion

I have no words better than Paul's beautiful doxology that we read this morning to leave you as a parting gift. You have become precious to me and I trust that you will continue to live daily in repentance and grow in faith, that you may live in harmony with each other, in accordance with Christ Jesus.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15.13)