

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH CHRIST THE KING YEAR A 22 NOVEMBER 2020

I'm not a great one for television, but for a particular reason I watched two half-hour slots of the 2016 series *The Crown* in the past week. It's historical fiction of course. Nevertheless, its dramatization of the royal family's failings as well as strengths is based on well known events. I have great respect for Elizabeth our Queen, but generally kings and queens in the history of humankind are a mixed bunch. The same could be said of presidents and emperors, or whatever else a nation calls its head of state.

We need to bear this in mind as we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. Earthly examples take us only so far. Jesus is given the title King in the gospels, which themselves reflect a background from Israel's history contained in the Old Testament. David was regarded as the greatest and best king though his wrongs are also recorded. In particular he organised the death of a man with whose wife, Bathsheba, he had committed adultery. Kings and a queen came and went after David's reign.

People had high hopes for their kings, despite the failings of many of them. This is reflected in some of the psalms, which might have been sung at coronations. Psalm 72 is a good example:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice...
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

The fortunes of the people were bound together with the character of the king, under God. A good king was good news for the people and the converse was true. That may be obvious, but the words from the psalm go deeper. They state that the people do not belong to the king: they belong to God, and the king is ruling on behalf of God. 'May he judge your people.' They also describe the function of the king: to judge with righteousness, to deliver the needy and so on. Kings had more power and influence in the past than today's ceremonial monarchs do. A common model for a king was that he should be a shepherd of the people – harking back to the figure of David. Today's Old Testament Reading, which we haven't used in this service but is available via the website, is a

passage from the prophet Ezekiel, promising the Jewish people a king who would be a good shepherd to them.

The psalm passage is reflected in today's gospel parable: the sheep and the goats. Jesus, the Son of Man, is portrayed as a king sitting in judgement. The poor of the people and the needy are represented by the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoners. But the big difference is that it is not the king who ministers to them. It is his followers, and although they do not know it, their king is present in the hungry, the thirsty and so on. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The sheep are doing the shepherd's work. Our judge is the person we serve, or fail to serve. It is a powerful parable with layers of meaning, not just a straightforward story.

So the parable describes Jesus as being in his people, the little ones who are members of his family, as it says. In the reading we heard from S. Paul's letter to the Ephesians the thought is the other way round: Jesus' family is in him, in his state of glory. The passage ends

God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Elsewhere in this letter Paul will expand on this thought: that God has raised us up with Christ. Yes it is mysterious; it is miraculous; but it is real. It is not an earthly reality, but a heavenly one. Putting it simply, Paul believes that if God has the power to raise Jesus from the dead, he is able to raise us also. We are 'in Christ'.

So today, as we celebrate Christ's kingship, we are celebrating a feast for ourselves. It points us to our duties in this world: caring for others because Christ is in them: kingship as being a good shepherd. It points us also to the life of glory which we share: kingship as the God-given victory over all that is evil. We need this twin perspective now more than ever.