

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 21 November 2021 – 'Kingship' - by Revd David Cuckson

Opening Sentences

The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord! Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, for evermore. (*Psalms 93: 1-5*)

HYMN Singing the Faith 43 (*Timothy Dudley-Smith*)

1. Come, let us praise the Lord,
with joy our God acclaim,
his greatness tell abroad
and bless his saving Name.
Lift high your songs before his throne
to whom alone all praise belongs.

2. Our God of matchless worth,
our King beyond compare,
the deepest bounds of earth,
the hills are in his care.
He all decrees, who by his hand
prepared the land and formed the seas.

3. In worship bow the knee,
our glorious God confess;
the great Creator, he,
the Lord our righteousness.
He reigns unseen; his flock he feeds
and gently leads in pastures green.

4. Come, hear his voice today,
receive what love imparts;
his holy will obey
and harden not your hearts.
His ways are best; and lead at last,
all troubles past, to perfect rest.

Prayer

All-holy God, you call us together to be your holy people, and so we join to give you praise for the joy of our creation; for our redemption in Christ; for the empowerment of your Spirit. Gracious God, fill our hearts with your love and our lives with your glory as we come before you in worship and prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Intimate God, we praise you because you know each one of us; the worries that nag us, the achievements we are proud of, the hopes and expectations that we hold, half-recognised, in our hearts. We praise you for what we know of you: the ways in which you have welcomed and met us, your quiet, constant, presence in our lives. And we praise you for what we do not yet know: the mysteries of your creation, the questions that baffle us, the wonders of discovery awaiting us.

Unknown God, may we be open to meet with you in unexpected ways: discerning your presence in what is strange to us, and seeing the familiar with newly-opened eyes. Amen.

God of justice, we have heard your commandments and they are a gift to us. Yet we have failed to live by them. For this we are sorry and we turn to you for forgiveness. We have not loved you wholeheartedly. We have failed in love to our neighbours and to ourselves. We have not loved our enemies or blessed those who do us harm. We live in an unjust world where many are hungry and there is little peace. Lord, have mercy upon us.

God, your heart is full of mercy. May we hear and trust your words to each of us: 'Your sins are forgiven.' May we forgive each other and forgive ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of grace and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit, and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no one can understand your truth. For Christ's sake. Amen.

John 18: 33-37 (NRSVA)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world, If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

Reflection

As Pilate said, he was not a Jew, implying that he only had scant knowledge of Jewish traditions and beliefs. So, in this passage from John's Gospel, he takes the opportunity to take Jesus into his headquarters to question him away from his Jewish accusers to question him about the claims that were made against him, or possibly *about* him, because Jesus might accept them as true. And it comes down to what you mean about kingship, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' asks Pilate.

It is hardly surprising that Pilate was confused, because you would need to know the Old Testament pretty well to understand the Jewish concept of kingship. But he was probably aware of sufficient of their history to know that they had had kings in the past of the sort that you would find in many nations, that the Maccabean revolt led to a succession of kings (except that they actually termed themselves 'priest-kings'), and that the current talk of a 'Messiah' was regarded by many Jews as some kind of political as well as religious leader of the people. What he probably appreciated less was that the Jews had in the course of their history developed a sophisticated idea of God as King, which was critical to their whole cultural outlook as well as their religious life.

If you look back to stories concerning the time of Moses, you see the beginnings of the idea that there is only one God – for the children of Israel, that is. Other people around them believed that there were a number of gods, all of which had to be placated with ceremonies and sacrifices. The Israelites, by contrast, entered into a covenant with one God, Jehovah. This was their special God and they were his chosen people; he was regarded as something like a king, ruler of his people, who would support, even lead, them in battle to claim a new homeland, and in conflicts over worship of the local gods of the Canaanites and so on. And then later we come across a series of earthly kings, most notably Saul, then David and Solomon, before the kingdom split into two, the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. David continued to be revered as the, almost, ideal king, but most of the others were seriously flawed in different ways and hardly provided a model of what kingship properly means in terms of the king's relationship with his people. So we need to be careful lest we project ideas from human kings to the kingship of God.

In many of the Old Testament prophets we see the table being turned, so that the theological ideal of the kingship of God becomes a standard to which earthly kings should aspire, and according to which they will be judged. And the idea of God as king develops, as well. There is one God who is supreme over the whole world of men and things. All the nations, whether they know or acknowledge it or not, are subject to his will. Because of their experiences in establishing

themselves as a nation under God, the Israelites believed that they had a special relationship with God, a kind of divine favouritism, if you like. God loved his people and cared for them, a helper in time of need. But this is expressed in terms of a covenant, which means that there are two sides to the relationship – yes, there is a great privilege for the people of Israel but it also involves a great responsibility for the people. This is expressed most forcefully in the description in the book of Isaiah of the people being called to be ‘a light to the nations’, to help the whole world to come to understand the kingship of God over the universe and the response sought from everyone.

With that background let us return to Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus – ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Pilate would have been aware of the special place the Jews of his day accorded to King David but probably first and foremost thought of him as a military leader who achieved political power in the region for his people. And there were people around, of course, who dreamed of turning the clock back to have that kind of ruler again, and that kind of position in the wider world. But Jesus’ understanding was very different. When he proclaimed the coming of the ‘kingdom of God’, or the ‘kingdom of heaven’, it was not in terms of a military regime, which although it might well be just, would be ultimately dictatorial, but rather of a loving father whose first thought is the care of his family, or the good shepherd looking after his sheep, protecting them from harm. As Jesus responded to Pilate, if he was Pilate’s kind of king then: ‘my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews’. Rather – and I suspect that Pilate was unable to grasp this – Jesus claims to have come into the world ‘to testify to the truth’.

The ‘truth’ is that the divine kingdom does not rule by coercion and force, but through our hearts and minds. Jesus speaks of God as essentially the God of Love. God is Love, and this holds the world, the whole universe together, including each of us individually and each of us as we interact with one another. And as we acknowledge the fact of this all-pervading power of love, so we can respond to this call by our own willing obedience to this loving God as we live out our lives, not only in our outward conduct but with our hearts and minds.

You cannot describe this kind of existence in literal terms, although we might be able to think of a few literal examples. But this is a global vision, that encompasses all the world that we can see, and also our whole being. The other Lectionary readings for today from from the visionary books of Daniel and Revelation. But I would like to close with one of the great poetic visions of how our own homeland can be transformed – the closing verses of William Blake’s *The New Jerusalem* (including echoes of the vision of the armour of God in Ephesians 6:10-20):-

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire;
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire.

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England’s green and pleasant land.

Prayer

God, Maker and Lover of all, we know that the way of your kingdom is not always easy, that peace is not given lightly, that sometimes justice comes only through struggle. We pray for the places in your world where we long to see justice and dream of peace.

We remember especially the peoples of countries such as Yemen and Afghanistan, where conflicts seem so long-standing and complex that we cannot imagine resolution; and we pray for wisdom and reconciliation.

We remember communities divided by poverty and racism, in so many cities of the world, where the gaps between privilege and powerlessness seem to grow every wider; and we pray for justice and healing.

We remember your church, sometimes fragmented and confused, where in spite of division, your people seek to live out the Gospel; and we pray for joy and a new sense of the Spirit's power.

We remember our friends, neighbours and ourselves [especially . . .] in those areas of our lives where we struggle to be true to what we have learned of you; and we pray for faithfulness and courage.

God, Maker and Lover of us all, who summons us in Jesus to the way of the cross, and empowers us to live by your Spirit, hear our prayer. Amen.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN Singing the Faith 328 (*Isaac Watts*)

1. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does his successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

2. For him shall endless prayer be made,
and praises throng to crown his head;
his name like sweet perfume shall rise
with every morning sacrifice.

3. People and realms of every tongue
dwell on his love with sweetest song;
and infant voices shall proclaim
their early blessings on his name.

4. Blessings abound where'er he reigns;
the prisoner leaps to lose his chains;
the weary find eternal rest,
and all who are in want are blest.

5. Let every creature rise and bring
its grateful honours to our King;
angels descend with songs again,
and earth repeat the loud amen.

The Blessing

Let us go out into the world as bringers of love, as makers of peace, as messengers of hope, knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life, of Jesus Christ, the way to life, and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life, is with us today, tomorrow and forever. **Amen.**

[Prayers taken and adapted from the 'Service of the Word' published by the United Reformed Church]