

'Give us a king to govern us!' Sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 6 June 2021 by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

I.

Well, on Queen's birthday weekend, it seems appropriate to have a reading in which God is described as king, monarch, sovereign. It's a common image used to describe God in scripture. God is King, we're told in our reading today from Samuel. And Israel's request for a human king is therefore a rejection of God's kingship. In the New Testament, Christ is called King and who heralds the kingdom of God. Christ fulfills both the hopes and expectations of the Davidic monarchy as well as God's cosmic sovereignty over sin, evil, death and thus as eternal king over the new heaven and earth.

What does it mean to say God is sovereign? That image may sit uneasily in our current climate when, for most, the significance of Queen's birthday is simply a chance to catch a breather as the days darken and the temperature drops. For others the monarchy continues to hold positive connotations; a reminder of one's British heritage and the shared history we have with other commonwealth nations, particularly through the two great wars. For still others, the monarchy is a relic of the past, an enduring symbol of imperialist colonialism. Just this week, an exclusive news report shone a spotlight on the British monarchy's exemption from various anti-discrimination legislation -- a report which, for many, simply entrenches the belief that the monarchy is an elitist institution operating with different rules to everyone else. For still others the monarchy is a messy mix of nostalgia and suspicion.

I don't presume to offer my judgement one way or the other. I simply say this to highlight that talking about God as monarch, or even more specifically as *king*, may well be a fraught task. And that is before we even acknowledge that *king* is a gendered term and a symbol for many of male patriarchy. At our small group on Thursday night, we talked about a feminist alternative that talks about the coming *kindom of God*, which emphasises that in Jesus we are *kin*, whanau, siblings. There is much to be said in favour of this term.

However, today, I want to suggest that gathering to praise the Lord Jesus Christ, the almighty, the King of creation (as our opening hymn begins) is still an important, even a central, expression of the church's praise.

II.

I have been sitting with Jesus' parable which we heard from Mark's gospel. Jesus somewhat cryptically says (as we reflected on in the all-age talk) to his critics, *no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man. Then indeed the house can be plundered.* If we imagine the house as the place where we all live, our world, then Jesus' implication is that our world is not a neutral place. It is controlled,

ordered, owned by “the strong man”, the bullies of our world, those with power, wealth, influence. The implication is that, in order for God’s liberating work to be done on earth as in heaven, the setting free needs to be coupled with a binding up of satanic forces in our world that oppress and that entrench inequality and injustice. Furthermore the maleness of the “strong man” image perhaps has heightened significance today as we recognise that systemic and structural violence has typically been patriarchal in form.

Jesus’ words remind us that our world is not a neutral place. There are always power dynamics at work, whether spoken or unspoken. In our postmodern society, we are perhaps more aware of this than ever. If the mantra of modernism is *scientia potentia est*, “knowledge is power”, then the catchphrase of postmodernism is the opposite: *power is knowledge*. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, was a forerunner of the postmodern worldview. He argued that knowledge is never purely objective, but in fact is used as a form of social control. Whoever has the power, in other words, can decide what truth is. In our post-truth era, when social media is used to propagate untruths and conspiracy theories, we see with startling clarity just how prescient his insights were.

For that reason, to say with Paul that Jesus is Lord or to say with John that Jesus is the lamb who reigns as King on the eternal throne is to make a powerful political claim as to where our allegiance lies and, even more fundamentally, where our base criterion for what is true and real comes from. To say Jesus is Lord is to emphatically say that all our knowledge is subjected to, judged by, the claim that Jesus is risen from the dead and reigns victorious over heaven and earth.

Karl Barth understood this with utter clarity. Barth was a Swiss theologian based in Germany in the 1930s. At the time, the German church had been fundamentally compromised by a dangerous mix of liberal theology with German nationalism. It gave theological justification for the Church’s support of Hitler and national socialism. In response, Barth along with others in the Confessing Church, *die bekennende Kirche*, drafted the Barmen declaration at the centre of which was the theological *confession* that Jesus is Lord. And because Jesus is Lord, Hitler is not. The Church owes its allegiance to Christ and no other.

III.

We would do well to hear Barth’s warning again today. Partly because we see the potential in the rise of populist politics for the mistakes of the 1930s to be repeated again. We should be deeply suspicious of any leader who claims to speak exclusively “for the people”. But at a more general level, I think our reading from Samuel today is a reminder that all human leadership is deeply flawed. In our culture we have somewhat of an obsession with forming leaders. We have offices for “student success” and “leadership development”. We have scholarships for the “leaders of tomorrow” and we celebrate those who demonstrate

brilliance and innovation. On one level, it is a very good thing to form people that can guide us through the sizeable challenges facing humanity today and in the future.

But on a deeper level, there is something insidious and problematic about our infatuation with leaders. Our Samuel reading articulates it well when God says to Samuel: “the people have not rejected you, Samuel. They have rejected *me* from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.” In requesting a king to lead and guide them, the people were not simply electing a human leader with all his flaws. They were erecting an idol, an ideal, of all their hopes and expectations of what their nation could be, a divine embodiment of Israel’s might and greatness.

I have been making my way through this book of essays by Madison Hamill, called *Specimen*. She is a young New Zealand author and this book recently won an Ockham award for non-fiction. I highly recommend it. Her first essay is a reflection on her experience at primary school and the ideological obsession at her school with forming young “leaders”. The problem, as she articulates well, was that she did not fit the ideal of a leader. She was quiet, timid, introverted, and socially anxious. And yet, there was pressure to be someone she was not. She writes these words: “I wanted to be a leader so badly I prayed to God to make me a better person ... I gave money secretly to charity, tidied the classroom, opened doors for teachers, did my ... duties to the best of my abilities, and tried hard in class. But the people who got the badges were not just loyal, respectful, and initiative-taking, but also talkative and good at sports ... I was not.” The result was that she felt that something was wrong with her. That her quietness was somehow a character flaw. Her teacher would venerate the great leaders of history: Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Harriet Tubman, Kate Sheppard, Ed Hillary. But in her words, he would venerate them in “ghost form”, shells, containers with which to fill with the ideal values of our society. Successful, capable, perfected shells of human beings filled with values.

But whose values? The problem is that when we place anyone on a pedestal, we are not only celebrating them but the collective ideals they represent. And ideals change. And furthermore no human being ever lives up to those ideals anyway. Consider the debate in recent years over public statues of historical figures that no longer represent the values of our society. Figures who achieved significant things but whose achievements have been tarred with the brush of colonialism, or racism, or sexism... whatever it may be. I read an article this week that said one solution is simply to tear *all* statues of historical figures down. Because history is not set in stone. Because values shift. Because all human beings are deeply flawed. Because we are bound to be disappointed when we look too closely and discover the heroes and heroines we’ve been venerating for generations are in fact just human like the rest of us.

The church is not immune from our cultural obsession with leaders. There is an emphasis in our church at the moment, in the midst of uncertain times, to train and equip *leaders* who

can *lead* us into the future. An admirable goal. But then again, I'm sure the people of Israel also had an admirable goal when they called for a king, someone to lead them.

It seems to me, from our reading from Samuel, that the Church's primary business is in forming *followers* rather than *leaders*. Followers of the God who led the people out of slavery. *Followers* of God, who orders the collective life of the people according to God's way of life. *Followers* of God revealed in Jesus, who leads his people on the path of humility and suffering, who led the way from death to life, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, leading us into the presence of God, ordering our life according to the coming kingdom or *kindom*. *Followers* of God who is with us by the Spirit, leading us into communion with God and with one another, restoring and healing us, resurrecting and completing us as the new humanity in the midst of a new creation.

One final comment: that almost the final image in the Bible, at the end of the book of Revelation, is an image of the new Jerusalem. And at the centre of the city there is no palace. And there is no temple. No symbols of institutional power. The vision of where we're going is a vision of life where we live with God and God lives with us in perfect communion. No need for God to be mediated through king or priest. The house has been plundered, the symbols of power razed to the ground. And it is a glorious day. Amen.

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