

23 November 2008

‘Jesus the King’

Ephesians 1:15-23

It is a matter of some debate as to who might be called the last King of Scotland, and it's all to do with history - a subject I've never been very good at! England and Scotland have shared a monarch since 1603, when James VI of Scotland became James I of England upon the death of Queen Elizabeth. But the actual title of "King of Scots" only fell out of use in 1707 when the Kingdoms of Scotland and England merged to form the new Kingdom of Great Britain. And so one could say that Queen Anne, who was on the throne at the time, became the last monarch of Scotland (and, indeed, of England as well). On the other hand, the last Scottish monarch to actually be crowned in Scotland was Charles II, whose coronation took place at Scone in 1651.

However, the self-proclaimed last King of Scotland - as many cinema-goers will know from the film of the same name - was the ruthless Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. To be precise, he declared himself to be "His Excellency President for Life Field Marshal Al-Hadji Dr. Idi Amin, VC, DSO, MC, King of Scotland, Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular". In fact he had been little more than a non-commissioned officer in the East African Rifles who had been promoted to high rank, ending up as a major-general and chief of the Ugandan army and air force. It was from this position that, in January 1971, Amin overthrew President Milton Obote in a military coup.

Within months a reign of terror began in which at least 350,000 Ugandans were murdered by Amin and his secret police. At the same time 55,000 Asian workers and businessmen were expelled (many came to Britain) and \$1.5 billion in US and British foreign aid money was stolen and squandered on military weapons. First regarded by the west as a figure of fun, Amin soon became recognised as the cruel tyrant he was. It was only in 1979 when, after an ill-conceived invasion of Tanzania, that Amin was forced to flee into exile, taking most of his ill-gotten wealth and supporters with him. He first went to Libya and then to Saudi Arabia where he lived until his death in 2003.

Mind you, Amin had some pretty nasty predecessors. Perhaps the most infamous was King Mutesa I of Buganda, who was visited by the British explorer James Hanning Speke and the American journalist Henry Morton Stanley (the same Stanley who found Dr. Livingstone at Ujiji). When they visited Mutesa's court they discovered that he had become king by ruthlessly killing every member of his family who might usurp him. He surrounded himself with an ambiance of superstitious awe and dread - among other things at least one member of his harem (and as many as four) was hauled out on a daily basis to a cruel death by decapitation for the smallest infraction, like speaking too loudly. And, when Speke presented Mutesa with a rifle, he handed it to a page with the instruction, "Go and shoot a man outside to see if it works". It did.

We in supposedly civilised Britain cannot gloat over this apparent savagery. Over the generations we have had monarchs who have done some pretty ghastly things, such as Henry VIII executing two of his wives or Richard III allegedly incarcerating the two young princes in the Tower of London and murdering them. Even Elizabeth - "Good Queen Bess" as she is often called - was a crafty political operator with a powerful and dangerous secret police. And, when we go to the Bible, we find even that highly-acclaimed kings such as David had a great deal of blood on their hands. For that was how monarchy worked: you led your troops into battle and you eliminated all your rivals - or else.

Today is being marked in many churches as the feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday in the Church year. We have read two passages from the Bible: one telling us about King Solomon at the height of his wealth and influence, being visited by the Queen of Sheba; and the other about Jesus as Lord of the universe and head of the Church. And the questions that must be asked are these: considering the understandings of monarchy which were widely held, not only in ancient times but even into the last few centuries, is it right and proper to think of Jesus as a King at all? And, if it is permissible to think of him in

this way, what on earth might that mean?

I think we all know what traditional kings are like - quite apart from being powerful and wearing a crown! They are permanent head of state who have usually gained their position through being born into the right family. In the past, the monarch's powers were nearly unlimited, although in Britain Parliament was able to restrict the sovereign's freedom of action, first through the Magna Carta of 1215 and then the Bill of Rights of 1689. The old idea that the monarch represented (within the limits of his dominions) the rule of God over all things culminated in the 17th century in the doctrine of the divine right of kings exemplified by Louis XIV in France. In other countries, such as Russia, the idea of monarchy evolved into "benevolent despotism," as typified by the rule of Catherine II of Russia. The French Revolution of 1789 dealt absolute monarchy a crushing blow, and World War I effectively destroyed what remained of it, as the rulers of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary were held responsible both for the war and the misery which followed it. The whole institution developed into the constitutional monarchy in western Europe, though near-absolute monarchies do still exist in Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia.

Of course, there are many questions which we may ask about kings and queens, at least in this traditional sense. For instance, is it right that you should rule a country simply because of an accident of birth? Is it right that one person should wield absolute power over their subjects? Is it right that the people should have no say in the choice of their leader? And can one honestly say that a monarch reigns as God's representative who must never be questioned? Modern societies would say "no". (By the way, these were the questions that many of our Congregational and Baptist forebears were asking over 400 years ago).

And, in the same light, one could ask two, almost contradictory, questions about Jesus. The first is whether, in a modern democratic society which cherishes the rights and freedoms of individuals, we should be setting up a figurehead for the Church who declares himself to be all-powerful and who demands our allegiance and submission. Is that really an acceptable way of thinking about God today?

The second question is much more basic: in the face of a world which not only seems to be enduring more than its fair share of natural disasters but also in which many people are suffering deeply under tyrannical leaders (whether they be kings, prime ministers or presidents does not matter), can we honestly say that the Bible's picture of Jesus as Lord of the Universe and King above all kings really holds any water?

Well, it is true that there are many passages, such as the one in Ephesians we read today, and others in Revelation and in St. Matthew's Gospel, which do offer us a picture of Jesus as a mighty king. I think those pictures - although they were not expressly written for that purpose - gave the early Christians immense confidence at a time when they were a persecuted minority sect and when the Roman Emperor was increasingly being regarded as an invincible God. It is true that some of these first Christians were thought of as unpatriotic revolutionaries because their primary allegiance was to king Jesus rather than to Caesar. However, I don't think that most of them saw Jesus in terms of a military leader; they knew that his kingdom was spiritual and future. But they - and many other Christians living in confused and dangerous times - could find encouragement in the idea of Jesus who in some way controls the destiny of nations and who will, one day, return to reign.

For, when we read the Gospels and, in particular, the trial of Jesus, we soon realise that he possessed no earthly political aspirations whatsoever - something that his disciples found extremely hard to understand. After all, he said to Pontius Pilate, "If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But, as it is, my kingdom is not from here" and decisively rejected the use of violence. It is clear that Jesus was a million miles from the local role model of King Herod, ensconced in his palace at Tiberias.

But what Jesus did have, on the other hand, was a keen sense of God's rule over all nations, a belief that every human ruler can only exist by the grace of God. While we may wish to question Jesus' belief following Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein - not to mention a whole succession of despotic Roman Emperors! - we cannot dispute that this idea was something he did believe in. At the present time

human leaders enjoy a limited (if sometimes appalling) power; we simply cannot understand why that should be and, at times, our faith in a sovereign God is sorely tested. But ultimately these rulers will all - however reluctantly - have to bow the knee to the glorified Christ. That is the only hope we have that this world will become a happier place.

And what about this issue of our individual human rights being compromised if we decide to follow Christ? That seems to be a genuine question, doesn't it, for we all enjoy freedoms that would seem unimaginable to most people throughout history - freedoms that have in many cases been hard won over many years. How can we voluntarily surrender them to become vassals of the king of heaven? Isn't this an anachronism in this day and age?

Well, I would respond to these questions in two ways. Firstly, I believe that human beings were created in such a way that they function best when they accept the lordship and leading of God, both as individuals and as members of society. If you like, we are like ships: they can actually sail across the ocean without a captain on the bridge, and they might do quite well for a bit before running into danger. They might also collide with another vessel that was similarly drifting out of control. A guiding hand on the tiller is necessary for them to function best. In the same way, we accept God's direction in our lives; we are not puppets being dangled on strings, we are still individuals with the ability to take responsible decisions. Personal autonomy is a good thing, up to a point: but we can take that individualism too far and lose our bearings in life entirely. We make Christ our Lord because that is how life works best.

The other reason why I believe that we can take Christ as our king is because it is not something that he compels us to do; it is our own voluntary decision, born out of a response to his love. We ourselves decide to crown him as master of our lives, he does not impose his reign upon us. We say to him, "You have loved me, redeemed me, set me upon a new path, given me hope. As a result, my sole wish is to serve you". For Jesus is no tyrant, making unwarranted and irrational demands on us, forcing us to cower before him in quivering fear. He is the loving Saviour who merely says, "Follow me".

Often in our prayers we say the words, "Thy Kingdom come on earth, as in heaven". That is our heartfelt plea to a Christ who, we believe, we only brings the earth's turmoil and pain to end when he returns to reign in power and glory. Until then, let us make sure that we allow his kingdom to grow within and from each one of us. Not just in word, but in attitude and deed, let us declare that Jesus is the king whom we loyally and lovingly obey.