

The power of a king.

Our passage from the book of 2nd Samuel this morning is not, perhaps, one of the most riveting and engaging of Old Testament narratives. It probably doesn't feature in our top 10 favourite stories from the Bible. The story takes place at a time when Israel is one, united nation made up of 12 tribes and not long since the disastrous reign of the first King of Israel, Saul, ended badly. Since then there have been all kinds of plots and power play as rival factions position themselves to step into the vacuum and David has played it coolly and skilfully and he is evidently God's choice as the new king. Indeed he has already been crowned king by his own people – the tribe of Judah – and now the other tribes come to David and ask him to be their king too. David agrees and chooses for his capital city the ancient Jebusite stronghold of Jerusalem which is so impregnable that it is said that even the blind and the lame can defend it.

And that's about it. Not exactly gripping, except that to understand this passage we need to read it rather discerningly, and we need to understand the sub-text, what runs between the lines, for there is rather more going on than meets the eye. You see, this text is about the crowning of a king, and therefore it is about power. And power is a central and indeed a very sensitive issue in the Bible. So, for example, David's coronation here at Hebron has to be seen in the context of a very negative view of kingship found in the Bible. We must never forget that the people of Israel were warned against the institution of kingship by Samuel, Israel's last ruler before the institution of the monarchy. Samuel's views were uncompromising – kings will do you no good whatsoever, he warned. They will conscript your sons to fight their wars and they will enslave your daughters to feed their appetites and they will steal your land and tax you until you squeak. And besides, God is your king! But the Israelites insisted: we want to be like other nations and have a king! And so Samuel – and God – relented and gave them kings and far too many of them were corrupt and oppressive and led the nation astray. Samuel knew only too well that kings become a focus for too much power – and power corrupts.

That concern lies in the background to David's coronation, and what is interesting about this account is that if we read it carefully we can see that there is a subtle but deliberate attempt to limit the power of the king, to set some

parameters and to make the king accountable. So, for example, it is interesting that in verse 2 our translation speaks of David being called by God to be ‘ruler’ over Israel – but the original Hebrew word actually has sense of ‘prince’. In other words the people here seem to be avoiding actually calling David ‘king’. They know that there is only one King and that is God and so they give a lesser title to David. David and all kings forever stand under the unique sovereignty and majesty of God!

Then note something else. The people say to David in verse 1, ‘Look, we are your bone and flesh...’ That’s interesting. What is that all about? Well, the people seem to be reminding David that he is one of them, sharing flesh and bone. And why would you remind a king of that? Is it a subtle reminder to him not to get ideas above his station, not to consider himself apart from or above the ‘common people’? How many kings throughout history could have done with that reminder?

Another interesting point. We read in verse 3 that, ‘King David made a covenant with the elders before the Lord at Hebron.’ Now, what is significant about a covenant is that it is a two-way relationship, one that lays responsibilities and obligations upon both parties. ‘Covenant’ introduces a note of mutual responsibility, of accountability and negotiation. In contrast, when David was made king by his own tribe of Judah back in chapter 2 there is no covenant mentioned. David is just crowned. Here, however, where his kingship is extending over all Israel, it’s as if the people are introducing safe-guards, saying in effect, ‘and don’t forget this is a covenantal, two-way relationship! You have obligations to us as well as we to you!’ And related to this is the fact that David is portrayed as a shepherd king, and when power and authority are defined in terms of a shepherd you know at once you are dealing with something different from pure naked power. A shepherd always has the wellbeing of the flock at heart and must be prepared to put himself at risk for his flock though, sadly, it does seem as though this particular shepherd has strong biases and intolerance. What are we to make of all that stuff about the blind and the lame who apparently David hates and of whom it is said, ‘The blind and lame shall not come into the house.’ Is that an exclusion order, banning the blind and the lame from the temple? And what does that say about the prejudices of power over against the powerless?

Clearly, then, there are undercurrents in this passage. There is a background of suspicion of kings. And there seem to be subtle but deliberate

strategies in play here to curb regal power and even to assert the rights and expectations of the people. Maybe it's pushing things too far, but might we not see here in this passage the seeds of later notions of democracy and the denial of the absolute rights of kings and powers and authorities?

Certainly it is fascinating to read this passage today, so close to the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, when on June 15th 1215 a group of rebel barons met with the deeply unpopular King John in an English field called Runnymede. There was a concerted effort to curb and limit the power of the king. For a start, echoing some of the nuances of David's coronation, there was a recognition that the king governed 'by the grace of God'. In other words the king stands under a higher king! And there are also clear overtones in Magna Carta of government by covenant, of mutual obligation.

Now, Magna Carta had a chequered history and it evolved, but its influence can be traced behind the 17th Century refusal of the idea of the divine right of kings, a notion which over-exalted monarchy and effectively denied covenant and resisted the accountability of king to the law and to the people. And the Magna Carta lay in the background of the Glorious Revolution when of course the English – and the Scots - had the good fortune to find themselves governed by a Dutch King, and we should be forever grateful for that!

But what has all this to do with us today? What lessons might we learn in a time when monarchs, where they exist at all, are severely curtailed in their power and influence? Well, at one level, as Christians we should always be cautious about power and aware of its potential for corruption and the need for checks and balances - whether it's the power of governments or banks or media barons or multi-national, global corporations. The recognition of God as ultimate sovereign must forever limit, constrain and relativise every human power and authority. An awareness of the majesty of God will always subvert any human power that puffs itself up and exceeds its boundaries. I love the story of the 16th Century Scottish reformer Andrew Melville who defended the church against undue encroachment and interference from King James VIth, the very architect of the doctrine of the divine right of kings, accountable only to God. And Melville had to forcefully challenge James' attempt to pull rank because of his status as king, putting the king firmly in his place by calling him 'God's sillie vassal'. And Melville went on to remind James of that other king, Christ Jesus, and I quote, 'whose subject James the Sixth is, and of whose

kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member'. There is the cutting edge of the Gospel – the church as the community of Christ the King before whom every power and authority bows in subjection and before whom all are equal be they the king or the blind and the lame.

Beyond that however our Christian faith sets our lives in the extraordinary, mind-blowing context of a God who is not only sovereign and regal, majestic over all things – yes, God is all that – but a God who voluntarily renounces power and become powerless. And this is the scandal of our faith, the point at which Christian faith comes into its own. This is a God who enters into covenant with us, a God who says 'you will be my people – but I will be your God' and this is a two-way relationship marked by the demands of faithfulness on both sides. And such a God, in becoming powerless, risks rejection by us.

That scene from Mark's Gospel that we read earlier is so revealing, so disclosive. There Jesus comes to his home town, to Nazareth. And there he preaches in the synagogue with power and authority. And as with David, the people recognise that he is one of them, their flesh and bone: 'isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?' they ask. Only here this solidarity with them becomes a pretext for ridicule and rejection – we're told that they took offence at him. And in that incident do we not see pictured vividly the astounding story of the Incarnation, of God in Jesus Christ renouncing power and glory and becoming one with us, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh? And he endures rejection – 'he came unto his own, and his own people did not accept him', but that is the way of this powerful / powerless God. He becomes vulnerable and powerless, all the way to the cross. And he differs from his ancestor David in that he has no prejudice against the blind and the lame – far from it. That is where his rule takes root, where the seeds of his realm are planted. And note therefore how this king sends out his followers. He gives them power. He gives them authority over unclean spirits, but he also sent them out powerless – with no bread, no bag, no money. Endowed with heavenly authority, they are to embrace poverty and powerlessness.

So to us here this morning. The fundamental conviction that unites us here is this morning is the sovereignty of Christ. The fundamental confession that unites us is that Jesus is Lord. Our lives stand under the power and authority of this greater son of David whose power is like no other – coming to

us in powerlessness, coming to us in vulnerability, coming to us in covenant, saying in effect, 'you serve me and I will serve you.'

So come to this table, where in bread and wine that covenant is sealed upon us. Here power is stood on its head. Here every other power dethroned. Here we are liberated from every power that would enslave us. Amen.

Gracious and loving God,
Lord and sovereign over all,
we pray today for those in power,
for those whose authority influences our world and our lives.
We pray for Kings and Queens
and for presidents and prime ministers,
for governments and members of parliament
and for those who frame and execute our laws.
Grant that all may serve under the law,
and with integrity and in the service of the common good.
We pray for countries which are in particular need of stability
and of good and wise government:

we pray for Greece in its economic turmoil
and we pray too today particularly for Malawi
bearing in mind our links with that country.
Bless its President and government and we pray especially
for the Mulanje Mission and for the hospital there,
for Ruth Shakespeare its medical director and all her staff.
O God may that hospitable bring healing and strength
to vulnerable people in that poverty-stricken nation.
And God bless this our church.
Bless our Consistory as our elders meet this week;
bless we pray the committees that are forming
to take forward the work of this church;
and we pray especially for those elderly and infirm who
cannot join us around this table.
May they know our love and support and that they
are as much a part of us as ever.
We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Almighty,
Gracious and loving God,
you are to be worshipped and honoured
for you are the sovereign Lord,
ruler of all things.
We praise you,
majestic over the stars and the constellations
and yet ever attentive to the sparrow's fall,
you who number every planet and star
and also every hair on our heads.

And you come to us in Jesus,
who laid aside all the glory and majesty of heaven
in order to come amongst us,
bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.
Before such a God we bow in humble adoration,
and we bow too in confession of our sin,
acknowledging our rejection of your rule,
O God,
rule over us in grace,
rule over us in forgiveness,
rule over us with the firm love that will not let us go.
Send your Spirit upon us
that we may enthrone you over our lives
and that we may seek to see you enthroned over our world.
We pray these things in Jesus' name and in his words...