

The abuse of power?

Last week in our service we looked at a passage in the 2nd Book of Samuel which described the coronation over the whole of Israel of King David, the best known and best loved of all the kings of the Old Testament. It's a passage about power, about a king being enthroned over his people, and I attempted in the sermon to read that account with a suspicious eye - to read between the lines, as it were, and to detect some deeper undercurrents in the passage. So, I suggested that what appears to be an innocent enough account of David's coronation actually involves a subtle attempt to limit David, to constrain and to restrain him from possible abuse of power. And in our passage this morning, which continues the story of David, I want to do something similar. I want to suggest that there is more going on here in this passage than meets the eye.

The story concerns what is known as the Ark of the Covenant, an item much cherished by the people of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant was a kind of a scared chest which had been constructed at Mt Sinai where God's Law was given and it contained very holy items – including, we are told, the tablets on which the Law of God was written. And the Ark of the Covenant was understood as the focus of the divine presence in Israel. Indeed it was believed that there God's throne rested, between two carved cherubim on the ark – hence verse 2 of our reading which speaks of 'the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim.' Now, recently the Ark had had a troubled history, partly because the people of Israel had abused it. They had regarded it as a kind of a talisman that would bring them automatic success in battle, and they had carried it into the fray against their enemies the Philistines where, much their horror and dismay, it had been captured. It's presence among the Philistines however was destructive and they had sent it back to Israel where it had remained in a place called Kiriath-jearim in the house of a man named Abinadab for 20 years. Now however, a new chapter in the life of the Ark is beginning. David has been crowned king and he has chosen Jerusalem to be his capital. So what a good idea! Let's get the Ark, the symbol of God's presence, and let's bring it up to Jerusalem, to the capital city, to the power-centre of the nation, and let's place it there – God's throne, side by side with David's throne. And in that way, with much praise and song and rejoicing, God will be installed, God will be established, God will be honoured at the heart of the nation...

Er, excuse me, but what? Just pause and think about this for a moment. Just picture that scene - the Ark of God, side by side with David, David's throne side-by-side with God's throne - and ask yourself the question: just who is being established here? Whose sovereignty is being honoured and reinforced here: God's? Or David's? In this scenario does David's throne stand in the shadow of the Ark, or vice versa - and whose power is being legitimated? And what happens when human rulers claim divine authorisation for what they do?

Bear in mind the politics of this situation. David was crowned King in two stages, first by his own tribe and then by the rest of the nation. And that reveals a crack, a division that was already running through the nation and that would eventually lead to a split, fracturing Israel into two. The fault-line is already there and David needs to establish unity, to hold the nation together. So, is this parade with the Ark really about honouring God? Or is it about David's need to unite the nation around him, using God as a focus?

You see, there any number of warning signals here in this passage. To begin with, should we not be a little wary of the fact that Jerusalem, in verse 10 for example, has become known as the city of David? Oh, it's David's city, is it? How nice for God to get to live in David's city! And then we read that the Ark of the Covenant, the very throne of God, is being carried into the capital or a cart drawn by oxen! Is that appropriate? Back in the Book of Exodus when it was constructed it was laid down that the Ark should be carried on poles by priests. Is all due reverence being shown here? And then there is this strange and troubling incident where we read that the Ark almost toppled - it seems the oxen stumbled - and some hapless character called Uzzah reached out to steady it and was zapped and killed. Well, it's disturbing and maybe that's not a picture of God that we like. But maybe God has had enough of this, of being stuck in a box and carried on a cart and being steadied in case he should fall off. Maybe God has had enough of the whole charade of legitimating and authorising David's rule and at this point 'bursts forth with an outburst', as it says in verse 8. And we're told that David was angry with God for this and well might David be - as the power of God that erupts at this moment puts his own meagre power into perspective and reminds people who is really King. But then, to cap it all, verse 9 says that 'David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, 'how can the ark of the Lord come into my care?' What a very revealing comment that is! 'How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?' Is not David really saying, 'How can the ark of God come into my control?'

Another thing. We read that when they brought up for the second time, after the mishap with Uzzah, David offered sacrifices and danced before the Lord, girded with a linen ephod. Now, what is troubling there is that David is acting as a priest and is therefore combining in himself the offices of priest and king. And the alliance between the king and the priest is often a dangerous and unholy one. Priests are part of the establishment and all too easily the priest simply blesses and sanctifies what the king wants to do. And it's particularly dangerous therefore for the king and the priest to coincide in one person. Of course that is why alongside the priest and the king you always need a prophetic figure from outside the establishment who can stand apart and pronounce God's Word against priest and king. Think of John the Baptist in our reading from Mark's Gospel. John the Baptist was a prophet who dared to speak out against the king when the priests kept their mouths zipped shut. And John had no place in the establishment – where was he found? Why, out in the wilderness, away by the Jordan river, miles from the temple, miles from the corridors of power. That's where his message is uttered and from there he will not be co-opted or pressed into the service of the king.

It's interesting in this regard to learn that the great evangelist Billy Graham, towards the end of his life, has expressed regrets over his ministry to American Presidents. For many years Graham was effectively chaplain to the White House and he has recognised, looking back, that he got too close to power and too often ended up baptising US policy – in other words he acted as priest to administrations and lost his prophetic voice. Priest and president, priest and king - that can be a dangerous combination, especially when they come together in one person as they appear to here with David!

David, then, has God just where he wants God – in a box, heading for Jerusalem, David's power base, where God will legitimate David's rule. And David acts as priest, sanctifying the whole show. And all that dancing and display, the song and dance: who is the focus of it all? Is that honouring God, or is it drawing attention to David? And maybe Michal who, we are told, watched David dancing and despised him was right because maybe she was one person who saw through it all.

We must always be wary when political power and divine authority get too close and climb into bed with one another. Indeed, standing here in this pulpit I cannot but be haunted by history and the days in the last war when Naz flags hung from the walls of this church. Then the text on our wall, 'Create in

me a clean heart O God' was replaced by the words, 'the Kingdom of God consists not in words but in power'. That's a grotesque distortion of a beautiful verse and a blasphemous fusion of the Kingdom of God with human power. Here the flag of a Godless regime was 'sanctified' by the Ark of God. And that of course was particularly offensive in a church like ours to which exiles once fled from regimes where church and state were too closely entwined, human power and divine power too interlocked, where the ark of God was placed too close to the ruler's throne.

As if we needed reminding, this passage speaks, then, of the dangers of religion, of the way that God has been used to bolster human power and authority, the sovereign God co-opted to human ends. And of course we see it today in the horror of ISIL or the so-called Islamic State, where God's name is used to justify and to legitimate violence and aggression and cruelty. But Christianity has been guilty of the same thing! And of course it's less of a danger now in this part of the world where secularism rules and where people have had quite enough of religion and its ways and where people are happy to say goodbye to God altogether. Just banish God and all the distortions and power games of religion! Well, maybe. We can understand that reaction. As Christians however we have another answer. As Christians we go a different way and rather than eradicate God we assert instead the sovereignty, the majesty, the 'otherness' of God over human affairs. As Christians we recognise that God cannot be put in a box of our making and carried around in a cart. As Christians we assert what we call the transcendence of God, the God who is beyond us, dwelling in inapproachable light, the God who says, 'for your thoughts are not my thoughts, nor your ways my ways', a God who cannot be co-opted by mortals.

Such a God is approached, and known, first and foremost in worship, and that is what makes what we do here week in week out so urgent and important. That of course is where David got it at least part right. He knew that God's entrance into Jerusalem could only be expressed in song and dance and celebration. That is how God is accessed. It's just a shame that the worship seems to have been as much about David as about God, and that he took on a priestly role in orchestrating the whole thing.

So, learn from this! Our God is found not in a box but in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. Our God was secured not to a cart but to a cross on which he

bore the sins of the world. Our God will not dance to our tune. But we will dance before him who is above and before and beyond us, and whose Kingdom will always displace the rulers and kingdoms of this world, and who will finally replace their rule with his. Amen.

O God,
as today we have read of David, Israel's king,
so we pray for world rulers and governments,
that you would guide them into the ways of peace
and righteousness.
Bless those who rule in the European Union
as they face economic challenges,
and the problems of refugees and asylum seekers,
and bless especially we pray the Dutch parliament.
O God, bring peace to this troubles world.
And as we have read today of John the Baptist,
we pray for those who are persecuted and imprisoned
on account of their faith,
and for standing up to power - for speaking truth to power -
and for all prisoners of conscience.
O God may the power of righteousness

and justice overcome the weight of tyranny.

O God we are dismayed when we see
the distortions of religion and faith;
forgive us when we take you name in vain
by using it to our own ends.

We pray against religious extremists and jihadis
who kill and maim and conquer in the name of their faith.

O God change the hearts of such people
and may they forsake their ways.

And bless those today in need of strength and comfort:

We pray today especially for the friends and loved ones of Beryl,
so sadly taken from us:

bless especially Maurice and David and Philip
and all who feel her passing most,
and we remember others who also grieve and mourn.

O God may your Kingdom come.

May your rule be sovereign over your world.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen

O holy and loving God,
eternal and sovereign Lord,
we praise and worship you,
welcoming you as you take your place in our midst,
your presence here among us.

Where you are there is love for hearts that have become hard,
and where you are there is peace for lives that are troubled,
and where you are there is joy for those who are ground down.

So we open the doors of this place and of our hearts
and we welcome you in,

and we sing our praise and maybe we should dance,
for we would praise you with body, mind and spirit.

O God, forgive us that our lives are lacking in praise.

Forgive us that what we professes with our lips

is not matched by our lives.

Forgive us that while we welcome you here,
we exclude you elsewhere and resist your claims upon us.

Gracious God,

Assure us of your strong commitment to us
even when our commitment to you is weak;

breathe on us your Holy Spirit

and so give us strength to rise up and to follow and to serve you.

We pray in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ,
in whose words we pray together, saying...