

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 4:3-13

26.11.17

The power at the heart of things

So here we are on the last Sunday of the Christian year, as next week we begin Advent and our preparations for Christmas. For the past 92 years this final Sunday of the year has had the distinctive title of ‘Christ the King Sunday’, and it was named thus in 1925, by Pope Pius XI, who did so because he was alarmed at the state of the world as he looked around him. He saw the rise of secularism, the decline of Christian belief and the erosion of the church’s role and authority, and he saw the rise of nationalism and dictators, and he wanted to set aside a Sunday to remind us that amidst all the upheaval and turbulence of history, Jesus Christ is Lord and King. And Christ the King Sunday is therefore an opportunity to think about the world we live in, to consider its state and how it’s faring, and particularly how it is with those in power, those entrusted with authority and rule. And what a good and appropriate Sunday to be doing this on the Sunday after the fall of one of the most notorious and tyrannical regimes in the world, as Robert Mugabe finally bowed to pressure and resigned as President of the beleaguered nation of Zimbabwe. What we saw in that regime contrasts starkly with the rule of Christ the king, as we shall see – but first a word about our text from Ezekiel.

The great traumatic moment in the biblical history of Israel came in the 6th century before Christ, when the already reduced and diminished nation of God’s people seemed to have reached the end of the road. In 597 BC and again in 587 BC the capital city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the then dominant empire of the Babylonians, its temple reduced to rubble, its walls demolished, and leading citizens taken away into captivity in Babylon. Thus began the approximately 60 years of what is referred to as ‘the exile’, a deep wound in the side of God’s people. The prophet Ezekiel lived and prophesied in that period and indeed accompanied the people into exile and he was outspoken in his denunciation of the rulers of the nation. Especially in chapter 34, from which we read, Ezekiel points the finger of accusation against what he calls the shepherds of Israel. It is not entirely clear whether Ezekiel has in mind the Jewish kings who ruled the land or the foreign powers that also cast a shadow over the nation, but either way the charges against them amount basically to an abuse of power. They grow fat while neglecting the people. They grow strong

while neglecting the weak and vulnerable. And the result is that the people have been scattered into exile, leaderless and with no-one to care for them.

Now behind all this there lies a deep-rooted suspicion about kings and power in the Bible. God in fact never intended Israel to have a king because God saw the rule of kings of other nations and warned Israel of the likely consequences of a monarchy. Kings will tax you, kings will seek their own interests rather than yours, so have nothing to do with them. And anyway, says God, I'm your king. Israel had a bad experience of a ruler when they were in Egypt and Pharaoh, the king, had exploited and oppressed them and God had freed them from all that. Yet Israel had insisted they wanted to be like other nations and so God gave them their king – and it had not gone well. In fact a nuanced reading of the reign of King Solomon in the 10th century BC seem to be a subtle presentation of Solomon as Pharaoh revisited with all the same old oppressions. God had tried to redefine kingship in Israel by using the image of the shepherd with all that it conveys - protection, caring, sensitivity to the vulnerable – but too many of Israel's rulers had not lived up to it. Hence God's denunciation of Israel's 'shepherds' in our reading.

So there is a deep suspicion of power and particularly power invested in monarchs in the Old Testament, and this morning I would like to consider Ezekiel's critique of Israel's shepherd-kings in the light of Robert Mugabe's toppled regime in Zimbabwe. And I want to note the features of power that are found in each situation and to put the two side by side.

So, first off, and most obviously, there is the fact that power corrupts: as Lord Acton famously put it, 'all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' So the shepherds in Ezekiel's denunciation have become corrupt, feeding and clothing themselves to the neglect of those they are ruling. 'Should not shepherds feed the sheep?' asks Ezekiel, while they instead have been fattening themselves. And of course what was so tragic about Mugabe was that he started well as the liberator from entrenched colonial rule. He was a Moses figure. But of course corruption soon set in as he and his wife and his cronies accrued vast wealth, while the country faced terrible shortages and hyper-inflation. The policy of transfer of land from white landowners was originally envisioned justly and without coercion and might have had a degree of success had it not become a means of further expropriation by the wealthy and for Mugabe's cronies. Power and corruption go together and it partly explains last year's election in the US where the victorious candidate was able to campaign

on a platform of ‘draining the swamp’ and playing on people’s perceptions of corruption in Washington. Power corrupts. It’s evident in the sexual harassment scandals currently rocking Hollywood and governments and institutions elsewhere. And returning to the Bible, Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness after his baptism are all about handing power and its temptations. At his baptism he has received the power of God’s Spirit – so at once he is tempted to abuse and misuse it.

And if power corrupts, it also has a tendency to concentrate and to centralise. The charge against the shepherds of eating the fat and clothing themselves might also be a metaphor for the accumulation of power in fewer and fewer hands. And the scattering of the people into exile is a counterpoint to the centralising of power in the hands of the shepherds. And it is significant that Mugabe began in 1980 as Prime Minister but after seven years became President, with a whole array of additional powers. And of course he had his clique where power was focused and the concern now is that the new President was part of all that, and how much will change, and what is meant by the ‘new democracy’ that has been promised.

So it is vital that nations and states have varying forms of separation of powers, or balancing of powers, to prevent too much power resting in too few hands. And of course the problem today is that increasingly the real power at work in the world lies not in nations and states but in multi-national corporations and conglomerates, huge financial institutions, retail empires and the like. And whose interests do they serve? And where does accountability lie? And just as an aside - it is perhaps worth noting here that our Presbyterian form of church government rests partly on the conviction that power should always be spread and dispersed. So we do not have bishops our arch-bishops or Popes but we have Consistories and General Assemblies: bodies rather than individuals, and our Consistory meeting of elders is an open meeting, available to scrutiny and to participation except where issues of confidentiality demand otherwise. A few weeks ago we looked at Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel where he warns us of power figures who exhibit the symbolic trappings of power, and he warns us not to call people ‘father’ or ‘rabbi’ for there is only ultimately one father or teacher and power should not be concentrated in human hands but should always be spread.

Well, all this takes us back to ‘Christ the King’ Sunday and to a consideration of divine power as revealed in him. And here we consider for a

moment that great passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesians that we read earlier. Here is Paul's portrayal of Jesus the one lord of all. And Paul pictures Christ's enthronement like this:

‘when he ascended on high he made captivity captive;
he gave gifts to his people...’

Now, this is a fascinating verse. It is in fact a quotation from a psalm, psalm 68, which pictures a king's conquering return after a military campaign. And he marches through the streets of the city with a string of prisoners behind him and the people are jubilant. Paul, however, fascinatingly misquotes the psalm. In the original psalm, as the triumphant king processes, the people throw gifts at him in recognition of his triumph. But in Paul's rendering it is the other way around. ‘He gave gifts to his people...’ In other words, this king does not accumulate power, he distributes it. So God does not centralise power and does not micro-manage either the church or the world - God gives us gifts and entrusts us with responsibility. And the New Testament pushes this even further. The one book in the New Testament - indeed in the whole Bible - that deals with power above all is arguably the Book of Revelation, written to subvert the domineering power of the Roman empire. And the Book of Revelation is full of bizarre imagery but one particularly strange image stands out. It comes in chapter 7 where John, the writer, pictures martyrs who have died for the faith under persecution. And in a wonderful jumble of mixed-up imagery John writes that ‘the Lamb who is at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life...’ Get that? What is a lamb doing at the centre of the throne? Why not a lion, or an eagle? Those are what might have been pictured at the centre of Rome's throne. But a lamb? What kind of image of power is that? And note, weirdly, that this lamb is a shepherd: ‘the lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd...’ In Jesus' realm shepherds are lambs, as the powerful are the vulnerable, as the last come first, as power is turned upside down and on its head!

So where does all this take us on this Christ the King Sunday? Well, we are reminded today in the events of the past days of how power tends to corrupt, and to centralise and to concentrate. But push aside the curtain of time, peak behind the curtain of history and peer into eternity and what do you see? Well, you see a throne. And from that throne the mighty tyrants of this world have been cast down, and seated upon it instead is a lamb. This is the power at

the heart of things. And this shepherd-lamb shepherd-king reaches out to the poor and the vulnerable and the outcasts. He reaches out to the dispossessed of Zimbabwe and Myanmar and Malawi. He reaches out to the refugees and the hungry and the homeless. And he says to us who he has blessed with gifts, 'go and do likewise. I empower you. I trust you with responsibility. And whatever you do to one of the last of these, you do to me.' Such is the power at the heart of things. Amen.