

Where is Christ's reign?

Well, it's Christ the King Sunday – or the Reign of Christ Sunday as it's also called, the last Sunday of the Christian year before next week kicks off with the first Sunday of Advent. It's a relatively recent innovation. Christ the King Sunday was named thus in 1925, by Pope Pius XI, who was alarmed at the state of the world as he looked around him. He saw the rise of secularism, he saw 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 Sovereign. 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 under those in power, those entrusted with authority. And you could say that our reading this morning from the prophet Jeremiah is a perfect text for this task.

The scene is set early in the 6th century BC when the Southern Kingdom of Israel, Judah, is about to face disaster. The armies of Babylon will soon attack and plunder the capital city of Jerusalem and take its leading citizens away into captivity and exile. Judah will be scattered: that is the dark cloud that is on the horizon of this passage. And the prophet Jeremiah blames the leaders, the kings of Judah, who, he maintains, have sold the people down the river. Taking the common image of the shepherd for the kings of Israel, Jeremiah denounces them: 'It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.' The rulers, the so-called shepherds, instead of caring for the flock, have effectively scattered them into exile.

And we read this passage this morning, and we set it alongside the world around us, and it makes for striking comparisons. Today, Christ the King Sunday 2019, the President of the United States of America is facing a serious impeachment investigation; and the Prime Minister of Israel, a key figure in global politics, is being charged with bribery and fraud, while the region around his nation grows increasingly tense; and last week a debate was held between the two prospective prime ministers of the United Kingdom in which both men were openly laughed at and treated with derision by the audience; while simultaneously one member of the UK's royal family was being effectively sacked due to the seriousness of the mess he's in. Oh - and then as the week ended the former leader of Scotland's dominant political party was appearing in court charged with multiple sexual offences. So much for our shepherds on this Christ the King Sunday. So much for power and for those who wield it – nothing much seems to have changed from Jeremiah's day. And yes, of course there are many who are elected to office and who serve with honesty and integrity and a genuine desire to improve the lives of others, not themselves – but we can understand why people grow increasingly sceptical of those in power.

Well, in this situation people yearn for something better. They long for change. And when you have a general election like the one taking place in the United Kingdom you suddenly have political leaders brandishing manifestoes that promise the earth - better times! - and suddenly there seems to be a bottomless pit of money for new hospitals and housing and schools and better healthcare etc etc etc. And in Jeremiah's time there was a yearning for change, for a new ruler, only our passage changes the imagery from that of a shepherd to a Branch: 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and execute justice and righteousness in the land...'. And so we have a promise of a Good Shepherd who will finally come and lead the flock. And as Christians, of course, we believe that he has come. We believe that the promise has been fulfilled. Jesus of Nazareth, our Saviour and King, spoke of himself as the Good shepherd, obviously with one eye on Jeremiah and the promises of this passage.

There is, however, one problem. Yes, Jeremiah's promise has been fulfilled; and yes, the Righteous Branch, the Good Shepherd has come. And we see signs of that in Jesus' own ministry. We see him going about and gathering to himself his flock, people who were ready for change, ready for a new king, a Messiah, someone who would make life better. These were people who were ground down by poverty, and taxation, and the weight of a foreign empire, and who were

disillusioned with the ruling elite. And these were the sick and the lame and the outcasts who were alienated and estranged from society – who were like lost sheep without a shepherd and who believed that in Jesus they had found their shepherd at last! And that is all good. But where do we see the reign of the Good Shepherd today? Where is it happening now?

Put it this way. Pope Pius XI may have introduced Christ the King Sunday as a kind of a protest against the evils of his day: against the totalitarian regimes, and the abuses of power, and the rise of tyranny. Over and against all that he wanted to proclaim the sovereignty of Christ: but wasn't that going against all the evidence? Was that not just an empty gesture? Isn't it a bit like a parent with a chaotic family and unruly children shouting, 'Look, I'm in charge here!' The very fact that they are having to proclaim it is evidence that they aren't! And given the state of the world today: given the conflicts, the tides of displaced people, the prospect of environmental catastrophe, what content can we give to the claim that Christ is sovereign? Is this not just whistling against the wind?

Well, there are two responses that I would suggest to this. The first picks up a point that I have made before but which needs to be repeated and emphasised – and that is how much Christianity changed the world, and how much it shaped our minds and our attitudes and our values. While the church has had many faults and failings and has often been on the wrong side, nevertheless it has profoundly influenced the modern world for the good. So Christianity challenged the mindset of the Roman Empire by proclaiming a sole Creator God in whose image human kind is fashioned, and that effected the way that human dignity was construed and defended in a new and revolutionary way. More than that, however, what is really significant about Christian influence derives from the kind of God it portrays, and let's just think about this. You see, if human beings are made in the image of God, so too is society. We are shaped by the kinds of Gods we worship. In our Bible Study this week we were thinking about how Pharaoh's oppressive regime in Egypt from which God liberated the Hebrew people was a reflection of the Egyptian gods. And in being called out of Egypt the Hebrews were being invited to be a society shaped by a different God. Hence the command not to worship other gods: you become like the God you worship! And God's of power create societies where power is sought and celebrated and where hierarchies are reinforced. But of course what is so astounding is that the Christian God is a crucified God - a God who we see in Jesus Christ hanging powerless from a cross, as in our reading from Luke's Gospel, with a sign over him, 'the king of the Jews.' And such a God produces different social arrangements, such that Christianity gained a reputation as a religion for slaves and for women, for the vulnerable and the underdog, for this Crucified Shepherd God had a particular bond with those on the bottom, the despised and rejected. And when the great artist Caravaggio depicted the first pope, St Peter, he didn't represent pomp but the indignity of his upside-down crucifixion, for the world had been turned upside down. And thus there emerged in later centuries values we now take for granted and are described as 'enlightened': the defence of human rights – even the poorest and weakest; and our solidarity with the weak against the strong; and the conviction that we are born equal, and that we are owed sustenance, and shelter, and refuge from persecution. These are not and never were universal, self-evident truths to be taken for granted: they came from a specific world view provided over by the crucified God of Jesus Christ and they have become commonplace in our modern world.

Indeed, returning to Jeremiah, the image of the shepherd is significant as an unusual image of power. Part of a shepherd's responsibility is to care for the weaker sheep: for the injured and the lame and not just the strong and healthy. And later on in Jeremiah, in chapter 31, shepherd imagery reappears as God is pictured gathering his people together once again after exile: 'a great company', 'among them the blind and the lame'. This is the mark of civilisation – or rather under Christian influence it has become the mark of civilisation – that a society is measured by the way it treats the vulnerable. It's part of the legacy of Christ's upside-down rule that we give thanks for on Christ the King Sunday.

So evidence of Christ's rule in the world might not be quite so hard to find as we might think. It is in our DNA, in features of the world today that are taken for granted even by people who reject the Christian faith. We are all heirs of its legacy. For all its faults and failings, its betrayals

and its oppressions, the world is a better place because of the impact of the Good Shepherd, the crucified, risen and ascended Lord.

There is, however, one other point to be made very briefly. Evidence for the Sovereignty of the Christ is to be found first and foremost – where? It is to be found first and foremost in a community that lives it out. Without that, despite the immense impact that the Christian faith has made upon the world, the claim that Christ is sovereign is in danger of descending into empty rhetoric. You see, the church is not a club for nice, decent people. It is the vanguard of the new creation that is coming upon the whole world. And that puts an immense responsibility upon us. We are called to live out the sovereignty of Christ, the Good Shepherd, to en flesh it. May we here in the English Reformed Church, on this Reign of Christ Sunday in 2019, in our lives as individuals and in our life together, be the evidence that bears witness to this claim. The world today in all its chaos and disarray desperately needs it. Amen.