

Christ the King

Today we celebrate and proclaim Christ the King Sunday, or as we have it here, the Reign of Christ. This celebration marks the end of our church year. We proclaim that ultimately everything is under the hand of God, and we come to the final teaching of Jesus before his arrest and crucifixion.

The idea that nations are ruled by a monarch, a personal, all powerful ruler is taken for granted in the bible. The problem for us is that we have little lived experience of living under a king or queen, who is the direct ruler of the people. We live in a democracy, and we are used to scrutinising our governments, and we kick them out if we don't like them or even if we are just sick of them. The idea of a ruler, who claims a divine right to rule and who will exercise that right for their entire life is foreign to us. Also foreign to us is the idea that those who rule us should be shepherds of the people. We never thought of Helen Clark as our shepherd. I doubt if we will ever think of John Key as a shepherd either. If we did, I am sure New Zealand would be a much better place in which to live. But the shepherd imagery has died in the consciousness of our nation. The bible, however, assumes that nations are ruled by kings because that's the way it was. The biblical writers assumed that rulers should be shepherds of the people.

In fact, if we go back to the scriptures, we find that one of the great debates all through the Old Testament concerns the matter of *who* should be king. The founding story of the people of Israel is the Exodus and a major part of the drama was the escape from that evil tyrant, Pharaoh, who enslaved the people and drove them into forced labour. The Pharaohs of course, had the status of human gods. So if you disobeyed Pharaoh, you were risking offending the gods of Egypt, which is what Moses did quite happily in his contest with Pharaoh and with all those plagues. The Pharaohs were oppressive and harsh rulers. God himself heard the cry of the people and went down to free them. When the people of Israel arrived in the Promised Land, they agreed not to have a king, who, like Pharaoh, might try to take the place of God, and who might also enslave them once again to build palaces and monuments and all the other things kings need. No, they would let God be King. But after a while, the people wanted to be like the other nations around them. So they appointed Saul and then David to be kings over the people. David was the shepherd king *par excellence*, and after his appointment the idea that kings should be shepherds stuck in the imagination of Israel. But the book of Kings charts how the rot set in from the beginning. Not only did the kings sanction the worship of foreign gods, they made the people pay taxes to support the royal courts. They made the people slaves just as Pharaoh had done in Egypt. Both David and Solomon brutally murdered those

who got in their way. In fact the kings did exactly what the prophet Samuel warned the people would happen: they became Pharaohs in their own right. So after the exile into Babylon, the Jewish people under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, abolished the monarchy. They vowed to return to God who would be their king forever, and no other. Even so, they continued to look for God's Messiah who would come and do what all human kings had failed to do, to free them from the power of the evil and establish God's reign on earth.

The reading from Ezekiel today reflects this biblical tradition of God as king and sets out God's paradigmatic vision for his rule. The primary image used is that of a shepherd, a vision that our 21st century notions of leadership could learn a great deal from. Listen to the vision of leadership God offers through Ezekiel: "I will seek the lost," says God our Shepherd, "I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." The Shepherd was one who would take quick, decisive, even ruthless action for the good of the people. Against all our images of human power which is often abused, and of stern authority, we hear the Lord's voice, the voice of the shepherd who tends the scattered sheep of the flock. We hear the voice of one who judges us not by our strength, not by our ability, or by our standing in the community, but by the depth of our need. Psalm 23 makes this point clearly; "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want". Under God, we shall be led into green pastures and beside healing waters of peace. The point at which we discover God as our shepherd is at the point of our need. That is where our capacity for God is found. The greater our need, the more we become aware of our dependence on God.

This prophetic vision of God as the shepherd king is fully realised in Christ. Christ turns all our images of human power upside down. He is one who comes to us in weakness to reveal the fullness of God. All through his life and teaching, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I will know my sheep by name. I will seek the lost and bind up the broken hearted. I will lay down my life for my sheep." As we know, Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday not with a display of power, but in humility. Unexpectedly, he rode on a servant's donkey. Instead of taking up worldly power, he laid down his life so that he could be with us forever. Jesus is the good shepherd who laid down his life down for us. He enters into all our dying and embraces our injury, so that all those things which batter and bruise us as we go through life are nailed to the cross once and for all. And so you see, brothers and sisters, this Jesus whom we worship as king, is like no other human sovereign that has ever reigned or will ever reign again. This holy meal proclaims Jesus sovereign where we expect it least: in the depth of our need for healing, in our suffering, in our deepest needs and yearnings. Jesus is no ordinary king.

Next weekend we will be celebrating the ordination of Anne Price to the priesthood. This is a special occasion for us all, for this is not just Anne's special day. This is a special day for the whole church for ordination is Christ's act in and for the church. So the church needs to be present. Today's readings point us to what a priest is. A priest is a person who has been called by God and the church to be a living reminder of what Christ looks like. They are to embody the servanthood of Christ. They are to be with us in our dying, to care for us when we are injured and seek us out when we are lost. They are called act decisively for the health of God's people, and so they are to work to remove the causes of relational dysfunction in the community and to work with God to establish shalom, that is, order and peace. The ordained show us what Christ's shepherding looks like so that we can all be more effective shepherds in the places we live and work and play.

So, what does the Reign of Christ look like and how can we embody it? We need only hear his word given in the parable before us in today's gospel. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." It is in the depth of human need that we hear the voice of the shepherd king, in the hungry and the naked, in the stranger and the widow, in those who we shut out of our lives, in those searching for peace and for justice.

If we are searching for Jesus, we will not discover him clothed in garments of unbridled power that demand our attention and respect. He is robed in our frailty, in our flesh, in the rhythms of conflict and peace. He is here in our struggle and desire to be witnesses. He is here in our search for hope and mercy, in our struggle to build an inclusive community, and in our work for peace. Here he reigns.

As we celebrate this Eucharist ponder the mystery that everything in all creation is ultimately under God. Give thanks that here in this Eucharist we experience a foretaste of the time when Christ's reign of mercy and compassion will be finally established. Ask God to help us see how we can cooperate to build the Kingdom; to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the stranger and visit those in prison. Above all, pray that Christ may reign as sovereign in our lives, that he might be enthroned on our hearts, and that he may reign over all aspects of our lives.