

## **Sermon for Mattins on the Feast of Christ the King, the 25th Sunday after Trinity, 20th November 2016**

*Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43*

In all the column inches about Donald Trump which I have read recently, possibly one of the more interesting things was in the Evening Standard the other day. What the article said was that Donald Trump was behaving very like a king. [See <http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/joy-lo-dico-it-looks-like-the-americans-have-their-king-after-all-a3398151.html>]. Quite often you read that the Americans envy us our monarch, but I doubt whether the feeling goes much further than a general feeling of admiration, given the history of the United States – the Boston Tea Party and the War of Independence were all about getting away from being ruled by a king.

Whatever Donald Trump - 'The Donald', as he is known - is, the nearest I think he would come to kingship would be as the Great Pretender. But it is interesting to reflect on what we think about kings today, as we celebrate Jesus as King.

We Englishmen tend to think rather benignly about monarchy - or certainly about our own Queen. David Blunkett, Lord Blunkett, the former government minister, made rather a good joke on 'Any Questions' (BBC Radio 4, 18th November 2016) about the fact that the Queen is getting hundreds of millions in a sort of Housing Benefit in order to fix up her house, Buckingham Palace: 'Just think', he said, 'what would happen if the Bedroom Tax were applied'! It's a measure of how much we like our Queen that that's just a joke.

One difference between King Donald and Queen Elizabeth is not in what they are, but in what they can do. Part of the

trouble with The Donald is that he is going to be the most powerful man on earth, President of the United States America: and some of the things he said he would do when he became President are pretty worrying.

By contrast, of course the Queen is a 'constitutional monarch'; she a queen who is simply a figurehead, but without power. She couldn't build a wall to keep out Polish doctors, nurses, plumbers and waiters; she couldn't suddenly withdraw from NATO or the climate change treaties, or ban all Moslems from entering the country.

What about Jesus? Pontius Pilate had asked him whether he was a king, and Jesus had given rather an enigmatic answer. 'You say so'. Over him as he hung on the cross, his executioners had put a sign in three languages, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

And it's clear that in those days, a king was not there just for show, not just a constitutional figurehead. He was supposed to be powerful. 'If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.' They thought that if he were a real king, he would have royal powers. He would not be bound by the laws of physics.

Apart from the spoof King, Donald, in most civilised countries we don't have kings who can do anything these days. It is a big change from the Jewish and Roman ideas, according to which it wasn't just what the king was that mattered, but what he did, his mighty powers, his mighty acts.

In our system of government, we don't just talk about monarchy, but also about democracy and, most important of all, the Rule of Law. 'Be you ever so high, the law is above you,' said that greatest of modern judges, Lord Denning, in

1977 [Goriet v Union of Post Office Workers], which was almost a quote of what the theologian Thomas Fuller had said two hundred years before.

Tom Bingham, Lord Bingham, Lord Denning's great friend, himself one of the greatest of modern English judges, in his classic book 'The Rule of Law' (2010, London, Allen Lane), explained that the 'rule of law' was based on the principles enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights 1950, itself reflecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

In our world, the power, in government at least, is based on a set of principles. But in the time of Jesus - and throughout Jewish history beforehand - power was in the hand of rulers, kings. It's true that, as you see time and time again in the Book of Kings in the Old Testament, kings prospered or fell in accordance with how well they followed God's commandments and kept his covenant.

Originally in Judaism, God ruled his chosen people, through the prophets. The prophet Moses led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. But when his descendant, the prophet Samuel, was old and infirm, the Israelites started clamouring for a king, for an autocratic leader. As I will discuss tonight at Evensong, what they said was, 'Give us a king to judge us' (1 Samuel 8:6). In that context, to 'judge' meant to rule. Up till then they had been content to be guided and led by the prophets by God himself, but now they wanted a secular leader too.

The mechanism by which someone became a king was by being anointed, anointed with oil. The Greek word for 'anointed' is Χριστός, Christ. In Hebrew it is Messiah. By the time of Jesus, the Israelites were constantly looking for

someone anointed by God, a Messiah, a 'christ', who, they thought, would be divinely powerful and would lead them again out of captivity, this time by the Romans.

This is where it gets interesting. The Jews - and Pontius Pilate - were concentrating, where Jesus was concerned, on what they thought a 'King of the Jews' would be able to do - and not on what he would be. Just as we might think about The Donald, they thought that, as a king, Jesus was a pretender - but they were worried that enough people might be taken in nevertheless, swayed by his rhetoric. They were worried that he would be able to persuade the ordinary people to rise up and revolt against the Roman rulers - and perhaps the Jewish leaders, including their king, King Herod.

But as St Paul says in the first chapter of his letter to the Colossians, one of his great 'Christological hymns', hymns about the nature of Jesus, the really important thing is not what Jesus might do, his deeds of power as a king, but what he was, what indeed he is: he is 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created ...' (Colossians 1:15)

This is a much bigger compass than just being able to win a few battles or do the odd miracle - wonderful as that would have been. 'For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him..'

All things were created by him, ' ... [W]hether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers..' Jesus is much more important than any king. He made the kings, is what St Paul is saying. Father, Son, all together in creation -

and then the body, the church. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is what is with us, how the believers together in the church are animated, the Advocate, the Comforter. So together we have God in three persons, blessed Trinity. St Paul, in a way, is going back to the time of the prophets. We are ruled by God, and not by any temporal, earthly king.

But what about The Donald? Well, perhaps we should leave him for future historians to deal with. But what about our, real, Queen? Underlying her power is the power of the people, democracy. Whatever you might think about the merits or otherwise of the recent referendum, democracy isn't necessarily a perfect system. Winston Churchill is supposed to have said, 'Democracy is the worst form of government, apart from all the others'.

But remember Lord Denning. Even above the Queen, there is the law. In a Christian country, which ours still professes to be, the law, the law upon which the rule of law is based, comes from a doctrine of human rights. Philosophers have debated endlessly where human rights can be derived from. It's not self-evident that a person has rights, just because they are a human being.

But as Christians - and, because they too recognise the Bible, at least in the Old Testament, as Jews and as Moslems - we can trace our law back to the idea that we are all God's creatures, and that God has laid down rules - the Ten Commandments - governing our life together. Human rights, for us, have a divine origin and sanction.

In the church, there is a king: Jesus, Jesus Christ, anointed. But as He himself said, his kingdom is 'not of this world' (John 18:36). It's something altogether greater. Dare I say, watch out, Donald Trump?

Amen.

Hugh Bryant