

Podcast for November 20th 2022

The Reign of Christ

Jeremiah 23: 1 - 6

Restoration after Exile

23 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear longer or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The Righteous Branch of David

⁵ 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 shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 23: 33 - 43

³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The Reign of Christ

We are just over four weeks away from the winter solstice - the darkest time of the year in Britain. Halloween, Bonfire Night and Remembrance Day have been and gone, and at last autumn is beginning to feel like autumn, as the leaves fall and it gets chillier at night.

For centuries there's been reassurance in the gradual dying away of the old year. It's partly that we allow ourselves the comfort of fires, blankets and candles. But at a deeper level, we welcome this fallow time. The old must drop to the ground and rot away to make way for the new to come, and to nourish the new with its own decay. The earth needs to sleep.

The comfort that comes from the familiar rhythm of the seasons has been disrupted by climate change. We might have enjoyed sitting out in the strangely warm November sunshine last weekend, but our souls sense something isn't quite right. We yearn for the feel of leaves trampled by our muddy boots; for the startlingly cold air of a frosty morning penetrating and cleansing our lungs.

We need the cold. We need the darkness. We need the dying away. We need the letting go. Here in northern Europe, autumn is cathartic for the soul. Dying away is not to be feared for the believer.

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Now the people of Judah had experienced a catastrophic failure. Their little nation had been conquered by mighty Babylon and their leading lights had been carted off into exile. Zedekiah had clung on to some sort of kingdom in Jerusalem for a time.

But would there ever be a king of Judah again - a real king, with real power? Could the line of David be revived? Jeremiah speaks into this debate. And we imagine the exiles wondering about possible futures - did a future lie in (one day) the revival of the old line of kings?

The prophet calls the old kings 'shepherds' - a startling comparison, for shepherds were those of low status, unable to keep all the religious rules and behave as decent Jews by virtue of their work. This word highlights the moral bankruptcy of Jewish kingship. Monarchs had failed to shepherd their people, meaning failed to care for them, to nurture them, to feed them and to protect them, and as a result, the people - the sheep - had been scattered.

Was it time to revive this old model of kingship? Jeremiah spoke of a righteous branch for David, who would rule wisely and deal fairly with the people; one who would execute justice and bring security. He would be called *The Lord is our Righteousness*.

The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, had a name that meant something very like that - *the Lord is Righteous*. But the prophet is foretelling a time when a king would not only bear such a name but would also embody its meaning. He was longing for the time of self-serving leaders to be gone, so that a new kind of leadership could emerge. In the prophet's view, the old style of kingship had had its day. Expectations of its revival must die, so that the righteous branch would grow. A new type of king, or a new form of leadership, was necessary and the old kings had to be consigned to history.

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What about leadership in our world today? It would be all too easy for me now to lament the hollowness of so much leadership today - in business, in the church or in politics. That's an open goal. Why not tap the ball into the net yourself; which leaders would **you** consign to the municipal tip of history?

Those of the Jewish faith must be allowed to make what they will of Jeremiah's hope for a righteous branch to come of David's line. As Christians we open the pages of the New Testament and consult Luke's gospel.

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NT Wright suggests it's as if there's a painting that's been veiled, and Luke dramatically pulls a cord to reveal: Jesus of Nazareth on the cross. Is this not the longed-for righteous branch, sprung from David's line? Is this not a king truly after the heart of God?

But what kind of kingship is this?

Now it's been said that the only writing we have about Jesus produced during his lifetime is this little written inscription about him reported in our gospel reading today: That inscription that was written on a sign and fixed to the cross.

It's fairly consistently recorded in all four gospels.

- Mark has the inscription as *The King of the Jews*.
- Matthew records it as *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews*.
- John's version is *Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews*.
- And here in Luke: *This is the King of the Jews*.

John says Pilate ordered its production. Why do you think he did that?

Was it to taunt the Jews? *If you have anyone aspiring to be a king, this is what will happen to him.*

Was it to humiliate Jesus? *Call yourself a king? I'll show you who has the real power here.*

Could Pilate even be acknowledging Jesus in some way? *You Jews wanted him dead, but there's something about this man I just can't ignore; maybe he is, in some faraway world, some heaven, a king.*

One of the criminals famously senses the integrity of Jesus and asks that he may be remembered. Jesus does so much more, and promises him paradise that very day.

I guess systematic theologians try to tidy all this away. Of course, the criminal had repented of all his sins. Of course, he believed in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Of course, he would have to wait for the general resurrection and the day of judgement before entering paradise. But our king says none of that, just: *Today you will be with me in paradise.*

So, what sort of king do we have before us on this cross? He's a king who turns kingship and indeed leadership on its head. He does that in many ways; I want to highlight just three.

First, Jesus' goal in being king is to **serve others**. An ancient king might have reigned first of all for his own comfort and prestige. A Christian leader is there primarily for the benefit of others.

Second, Jesus' kingship is centred on **sacrifice**. An earthly leader might expect to get wealthier in office. A Christian leader is one prepared to spend themselves on behalf of the poor and give of themselves for the enrichment of others.

And third, Jesus **gains soft power precisely by giving up hard power**. In Jesus, God is revealed as one who leads the world by the power of suffering love. The gospels show Jesus actively turning away from summoning his own rescue through legions of angels. He faces what he faces with vulnerability, and he does that to inspire love in human hearts.

Jesus is the King of love; he is the King of hearts. You can control another's body by force if you are physically stronger. You can control another's behaviour by coercion and threats. But you can't win another's heart by brute force. A heart can only be won by love.

We look at King Jesus on the cross. It's a dark moment; Matthew tells us it was dark from noon until 3pm. It's a time for so much to die away in the darkness. Our pride; our vanity; our hatred; our envy; our small-mindedness; our bitterness.

As you experience the darkness of the cross, what do you think needs to die away?

Earlier I asked which leaders you might consign to the rubbish dump. It was a trick question! One of the things that needs to die away is surely humanity's tendency to consign others to the rubbish dump, or to hell. What else needs to die away? In your personal life... What is coming to an end? Is there anything you have to let die? In your church life is anything coming to an end? Not all ministries endure forever. In the world around you? What do you see that needs to die away so that new things can emerge?

Do you recognise King Jesus? He is the King of Love. Does this king call you to let something die away so that love itself can grow again? All the proud kingdoms and empires of the earth rise and rise and fall and fall and one day come to nothing... But throughout the centuries of history, the kingdom of love has continued to come. What must die away so that the kingdom of love continues to come?

Today marks the end of the church calendar. Next Sunday is Advent Sunday, and a new cycle of readings begins as we look for the dawn of a new light in the coming of Christ. But today is a darker day; today is about allowing what is dying to die, so that new life may grow.

Meditation

Make yourself comfortable, but also poised and alert...

Imagine yourself going out into a beautiful garden at dusk. You remember it from June, from high summer - vibrant flowers and arching trees and buzzing bees; how all that delighted you when the days were so warm and bright.

But now, well, to be warm you've had to wrap up; it's getting close to freezing already.

As the light begins to fade, what can you feel? Perhaps an icy breeze on your face. What can you smell? Maybe damp earth or smoke from a smouldering fire somewhere.

What can you hear? A dog barking? A neighbour moving their bins?

What can you see? As the night grows dark a single star appears.

You sense the leaves of a tree underfoot. A last leaf drops from a branch as you stand and think about letting go of the old.

What feelings do you experience?

Sadness at this time of things dying away?

Disappointment at opportunities that came to nothing?

Relief that some things at last can be released into the autumn wind and gotten rid of?

A sense of cleanliness, nakedness, and emptiness... openness

Open the palms of your hands...

Breathe out whatever needs to go...

Name things in your heart as you expel air through your nostrils...

Let them go, one by one. Let them die into the earth so they might nurture what is coming next year,

Now your eyes are getting dark adapted.

And see there, at the end of the garden, a figure standing waiting for you. It is Jesus and he stands by an open gate at the end of the garden.

Will you go with him?

Love calls you on.

Love calls you to leave that garden behind for now. Leave it for the winter. Let it rest.

Let new life be formed in the secret spaces of the earth.

Jesus takes your open hand and leads you through the gate.

What do you feel as you walk with him into pure darkness?

Excitement? Nervousness? Fear? Freedom? Joy?

You go because Love calls you onward.

You go because Jesus asks you to go.

You go because the King of Love goes with you.