

The marks of kingship

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

Of all the titles given to Jesus, that of 'King' sits most uncomfortably. We like our saviours accessible, near-at-hand, not too grand and not lording it over us. Jesus would almost certainly have been uncomfortable with the term too.

Perhaps the better notion is 'servant king'. True leadership is not simply about issuing commands. It is about setting an example, and showing what needs to be done, and then getting on with doing it alongside others.

Jesus' lordship was found in washing disciples' feet, His 'throne' was a cross, and His crown was made of thorns. It is a complete inversion of the victorious conqueror image that many might have of what a king should be like. No golden palaces and fine garments and privileged existence for the servant king who is Jesus Christ. "The majesty of this king is revealed not when we look up, but when we look down."ⁱ

Today's reading from Luke's gospel reminds us, particularly as we head into Advent and Christmas beyond, that the baby whose birth we anticipate and celebrate, was on a road that led from Bethlehem to Calvary. A road marked with all the trials and tribulations of life. A road marked with laughter and tears. A road where ordinary and extraordinary things happened. A road where friendships were made and betrayed. A road where hard work was done and times of rest were enjoyed. A road where prayer and singing and silence all played a part. A road travelled in company and solitude. A road that went from the crib to the cross and then beyond.

The story of Jesus' kingship that finds its place on the cross is not for the squeamish. It's a story that pulls the curtain back on the suffering God, who in Jesus Christ is captive and broken-hearted. Torn between the folly of human sin and frailty and the unquenchable love that God unflinchingly, unswervingly pours out on people like you and me. In amidst all the pain and brokenness, betrayal and doubt, shattered dreams and uncertainty, the promise made about Jesus at His birth, in what we call the incarnation, is that God is with us.

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This story is not for the squeamish, but the world we live in today is not for the squeamish. The story Luke tells us about God in His gospel starts in the poverty of a stable, and weaves its way through the mighty being knocked from their thrones, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled and the rich sent away with nothing.ⁱⁱ Jesus begins and ends His earthly life in the forgotten stable, and ends it on the abandoned cross.

What are the marks of kingship? A couple of weeks ago I was in London and went to see Glenda Jackson play King Lear. It was an astonishing performance. As you know, spoiler alert, it doesn't end well. Everyone dies. After three and three quarter hours, the audience was mostly dead too. As the Lear dips in and out of madness, mirroring his companion, the Fool, we see that wisdom and folly, pride and prejudice mix and mingle. The use and abuse of power, the exercise of authority capriciously, leads to tragedy and with little sign of redemption at the end of it. For Lear, the marks of kingship could not save him from his own folly. All the gifts he gave away brought no blessing, revealing only the emptiness of human power. Howling in the wilderness, there is no hope of peace, of heaven, of rest, of love, and Lear dies a broken man.

We might be tempted to argue the same for Jesus. His marks of Kingship a mocking crown of thorns. Stripped naked on a cross, vulnerable, rejected, mocked, scourged, bleeding, dying. Looking abandoned, denied and betrayed. Yet in Luke's telling of the Passion scene, not finally alone.

On one side a mocking thief, supported by the taunts of the soldiers and the crowds. The whole world knew what a King should be, should look like, should behave. And it wouldn't have been that breaking body on a wooden cross.

But the marks of Jesus' kingship did not depend on crowns and purple robes. The marks of Jesus' kingship are to be found in forgiveness. Jesus had spent His life preaching liberation to the captives, healing to those who were sick and lame. His Kingship was not based on conquest, but on love and mercy and forgiveness and hope.

His last words to another human being before His death and resurrection were words of forgiveness. The forgiveness that had marked His kingship from start to finish. He asks forgiveness for the people who had treated Him so cruelly. And to the penitent thief, crucified alongside Him, Jesus, consistent with His mercy and love, points the way to heaven, and includes the sinner in the coming Kingdom of God. "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise."

The marks of Jesus' Kingship are forgiveness, mercy, inclusion and hope. They are founded on service.

When we look at leadership in our world today, in any and every sphere of life: politics, the law, the church, sport, education, the charity sector, banking, commerce, what are the marks of leadership? What do we look for and what have we a right to expect? Clarity of vision? Integrity. Courage? Compassion?

But it is not only in the lofty places of the land where the marks of kingship, of leadership should be found. We look for the same marks in the ordinary and everyday. Jesus takes the idea of kingship, of leadership, and applies it to the way He invites His disciples, then and now, lead their lives. It is not for the great and the good, it is for all of us. It is not always about the ruling of nations and the decisions of business, it is at the day-to-day levels where we live our lives.

What marks of leadership do you show as a wife, or husband or partner? What marks leadership do you show in your work place, or in a charity or organisation to which you belong? What marks of leadership do you show as youth organisation leader, or a rota team organiser, or an elder, or even a Moderator Designate? Are the marks of Jesus, the servant king, the marks of love, mercy, inclusion and hope to be found in the way you shape your life and help shape the lives of those around you?

At the end of the Christian year, not from a throne but from the cross Jesus faces down resolutely but gently the powers of violence and death, they will not be the last words. The reign of Jesus, the servant king, initially clouded in a darkness that fell over the sad earth, was

pierced by a far, faint light rising from the dawn of God's coming kingdom, a place as calm and refreshing as the garden we call paradise.ⁱⁱⁱ

With the servant king, you are going to be called to show some leadership in the days that lie ahead, in a big way, or a small way. It will reveal the faith and the hope and the love that is rooted in your life. It will continue to transform the way you live and believe. And it will bring light into the world of the people around you, friend or stranger. What are the marks of Kingship? To show people the way to mercy, and to walk with them all the way to paradise, where the servant king waits to welcome you home.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Eberhard Busch, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4, p332

ⁱⁱ Craig T Kocher, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke vol 2, p328

ⁱⁱⁱ Patrick J Willson, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4, p337