

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> November – Christ the King Sunday

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

On the Sunday after the Queen died back in September we sang the National Anthem here in church. We sang “God save the King” of course. Most of us had never sung those words before; some of us had distant memories of doing so some 70 years ago. But for all of us it was a poignant moment in a moving service; and I know at least one member of the congregation was in tears at that point. Having a king was new to us.

Way back in Jeremiah’s time – some 500 or 600 years before the time of Jesus - the nation was used to having kings – the current ones were Jehoiachin and then Zedekiah who succeeded him. The nation had been ruled by a host of kings – including those two - who had led them astray. The Biblical phrase often used to describe such kings was that they “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The nation hoped and longed for a new and different and better king, and Jeremiah’s vision or prophecy that we heard this morning looked forward to that day when this new king would come.

I suppose its hard for us to imagine that a change in king would or could change a nation’s fortunes. Our King, like the Queen before him, has largely a ceremonial role. But recent months have given us an insight how a change in Prime Minister can effect a huge change in how the nation sees itself and how other nations see it. And we can see that around the world – Italy or Brazil for example – where a new Head of State brings about significant change.

The words of Jeremiah anticipated God raising up a new king like David who would completely change not only the nation but also the whole world. Jeremiah says *He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 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.’*

For Israel the king referred to by Jeremiah became known as the Messiah figure, and there were many other prophecies about him in addition to the one we read this morning. As well as having the Kingly role of ruling, this king would also be a saviour – saving the people from oppression and apostasy. Bringing them back to a restored relationship with their God.

The nation waited for this Messiah, this King. In their minds they imagined him to be a conquering king who would free the nation of Israel from all oppression. The execution of justice foretold in our reading from Jeremiah was seen as taking vengeance on foreign enemies; the execution of righteousness seen as the purity of the nation as they returned to God. With those thoughts in their minds it's not altogether surprising that they failed to recognise the Messiah King when he came.

Because the Jesus who came was not like that.

A theme that runs through the gospels is that Jesus was not recognised for who he was as the Messiah, primarily because he did not fit the expected stereotype of the conquering king. The words above his cross "This is the King of the Jews" were there to ridicule Jesus because it seemed so impossible that the long promised king should die on a cross. Words that were intended to mock and ridicule, but words that instead declared an eternal truth.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians is a remarkable passage expressing eternal truths about Jesus. Made even more remarkable because this was only written down only some thirty or so years after he lived – and quite possibly there were some people who read this letter who had met Jesus in the flesh.

It's a remarkable passage because it expresses clearly the divinity of Jesus and his presence at the very beginnings of creation. *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him*

And I guess there were some people – perhaps those who had heard others tell of this Jesus, or maybe even those who had met him themselves – for whom such a passage was hard to grasp. How could it be that Jesus – the one they had met or heard about, Jesus the human being - could also be this firstborn of all creation, could also be this image of the invisible God? The two things are hard to hold together; though both – as we are aware, and as it expresses in our creeds – are essential to our Christian belief.

And this holding together of two seemingly opposite and contradictory beliefs came up this week in the Journey on Together group. We were talking about how we see God. Do we see God primarily as Almighty, all powerful and majestic, or do we see him as a loving father, a friend alongside us in all we do and all we are. We reached the conclusion we need to embrace both aspects of God – he is the loving father and friend and yet he is the majestic creator of the universe.

So I wonder how we see Jesus.

Do we look to his humanity? Picture him alongside the sea of Galilee, teaching, encouraging, showing love and compassion to people. Do we see him as the victim on the cross. Wrongly arrested, suffering unjustly. Perhaps even offering his life up in some way for us all?

Or do we see him as God. The physical image of the eternal and unseeable God. The one who was present at the very beginnings. The eternal Word – as we read in the prologue to John's gospel. The one who forgives.

The incredible truth is that both are Jesus and he is both.

Today is the festival of Christ the King – when we think of the kingship of Jesus. Does that, I wonder, bring another another dimension to the question of who Jesus is and how we see him?

In his life and ministry Jesus spoke often about the Kingdom – either referred to as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. The recognition of God's rule and authority. Partially present in the here and now, to be fully realised at the end of the age. There were parables about the kingdom; references to people being not far from the kingdom, mentions of the kingdom of God being among us.

When we think of Jesus as King we are likewise thinking of something that is partially true now, but to be fulfilled in its completeness at the end of the age. Jesus is King but will be fully revealed and recognised as such in the age to come when everything and everyone bows down before him and acknowledges his rule and authority. A bit like the fact that Charles is King now, but will be crowned king next May at his coronation.

So back to our questions today. How do we see Jesus.

We have Jesus the human being, whose life we can picture and whose example we can follow. We have Jesus who is God – the one there before time began, the one we can worship and the one who forgives, and Jesus the King – our Lord – the one who we obey and follow and the one before whom everyone and everything will bow down.

And the great mystery of faith is that all are true and all are Jesus. Jesus – to be worshipped, to be loved and to be obeyed.