

YOU SAY THAT I AM A KING

St. Michael, Cornhill

Christ the King

Sung Eucharist and Confirmation

Sunday November 22nd, 2015

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One amongst all the humorous books written, which has now remained a favourite for almost three generations, is Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 And All That*. It lampoons English history and the way it's been taught. Let me give you an edifying extract from early on in the book:

'Canute began by being a Bad King on the advice of his courtiers, who informed him (owing to a misunderstanding of the *Rule Britannia*) that the King of England was entitled to sit on the sea without getting wet. But finding that they were wrong, he gave up this policy and decided to take his own advice in future – thus originating the memorable proverb, 'Paddle your own Canute' – and became a Good King and C. of E., and ceased to be memorable. Canute had two sons, Halfacanute and Partacanute, and two other offspring, Rathacanute and Hardlicanute, both of which he denied to the last that he was their Fathacanute.'

That passage is very typical. There are lots of names just slightly wrong – mention of people being *memorable* and contrasts between *Good* and *Bad Kings*. Indeed you could subtitle the book: 'Humorous Annals of the English kings. Most kings (and indeed queens) get a mention. They turn out to be wildly different – indeed some of them tend to be *wild*, like red-haired King Rufus. Alongside the humour, of course, as with any satire, there's often hidden in the text some serious points. So, for example, throughout the centuries English kings have varied greatly – good, bad, strong and weak, determined and undirected. Indeed so much do they vary that the concept of king is hardly recognisable with any consistency.

King Alfred, and many who followed – including Canute were often little more than tribal warriors ruling over just part of what we now call England. Henry VIII was intelligent, irascible and changed Britain's relationship with the Papacy. His daughter was acute and a remarkable ruler; Victoria gave her name to an age. Twentieth century constitutional monarchs are a world apart again. The Queen rules but only through Parliament. So kingship is an interesting but slippery concept.

Now today, we celebrate *Christ the King*. Clearly Christ is not an earthly ruler, the governor of a nation, nor indeed even a hereditary successor like other national sovereigns. What do we mean, then, by talking of Christ the King? Our three readings are interesting and helpful when we attempt to answer that question. First we heard from the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Daniel was written about one hundred and fifty years before the time of Jesus. The Jews were suffering under a humiliating tyrant, a Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. They were living with terrible indignities. So Daniel was written to offer them comfort and hope. Daniel pictures a very different king, in the God of Israel:

'...as I watched, the Ancient of Days took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool, his throne was fiery flames and its wheels were burning fire . . . then I saw one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.'

These visionary pictures are intended to convey a power, majesty, strength and goodness that eclipses Antiochus, the earthly monarch, entirely.

Then we heard from the Apocalypse, the Revelation to St. John the Divine. Once again, like Daniel, it's what is often called *apocalyptic* literature, looking to the end of the world, a world looked over and finally safeguarded by God. Once again we read:

‘Behold! He is coming on the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. “I am the Alpha and the Omega”, says the Lord God.’

So here there's similar language, some similarity of vision, but here it is *Christ* who is the monarch, but a very different monarch: ‘even those who pierced him will see him.’

So Jesus then is a very different sort of king. He is God incarnate – God in our humanity, and he triumphs after great suffering. Finally we heard a short snippet from that amazing trial scene of Jesus, as it is set out in John’s Gospel. Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king and Jesus turns the tables on him:

‘My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting. . . ‘

Then Jesus says to Pilate:

‘You say that I am a King.’

But he does not simply affirm Pilates’ statement. He returns to ‘the truth’ proclaimed in God:

‘Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice.’

He is an entirely different sort of king.

So through this series of readings, a picture is built up. Jesus is a king, but a king who suffers. Jesus is, as is sometimes said, the Pantokrator, that is the ruler of the universe. But none of these pictures coincides with earthly kingship. Jesus does not rule as an autocrat. Instead with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he rules all that exists in being. He is indeed *memorable* and a Good King, as Sellar and Yeatman would say. He is anointed both as King and for suffering.

Our Queen was anointed when she was crowned. Today Angharad and Alex will be anointed. They, like all who are confirmed, are given a kingship. For God crowns our humanity by becoming one of us in Jesus. That crowning describes the kind of human life to which Jesus calls us. So, this is a splendid day on which Alex and Agharad have come to be confirmed – and next week as Advent begins, we shall herald the birth of that same king who crowns all of us in his love. How can we capture that Kingship such that our crowned humanity is one which lives the life we see in Jesus. Amen.

Readings

Daniel. 7. 9-10; 13-14.

Revelation. 1. 4b-8.

John. 18. 13-37