

RELEASING THE KING

St. Mary's, Ilford

Christ the King

Sunday November 20th 2016

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

‘They’re changing the guard at Buckingham Palace –
Christopher Robin went down with Alice.’

Many of us will have been brought up on A.A.Milne’s *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*. But with that poem I remember E.H. Shepherd’s touching picture of Christopher Robin standing with his nanny, looking through the palace railings.

That tableau reminded me of another ironic story I heard told of a Mum who had taken her daughter to the changing of the guard. Having peered through the railings and watched the bear-skinned guards marching their sentry duty, the little girl began to ponder all this. Quizzically, she looked to her mother and asked: ‘Mummy, what would the Queen do to us if she got out of those railings?’

It was, I thought, a marvellous reflection, first of course, because the railings are there for precisely the opposite reason – to keep others out. But the irony runs deeper. For the Queen, as a constitutional monarch has no personal power. Even if she wished to do so, she couldn’t order an army into Syria or whatever; she couldn’t by personal edict send someone to prison. In fact, in an odd sort of way she has even less power than most of us. Caged in by protocol, security people, and an unspoken limit on what she might say in public, she has less liberty than we have.

Yet, despite all this, there is a clear sense in which the neutrality, continuity and tradition of the monarchy offer a stability even at the most scary and uncertain moments in our nation’s history. When the chips were down, during Hitler’s War, the King and Queen Mother were key people in holding up the spirit of the nation. So, curiously, the utter and complete lack of power, speaks of a different sort of power in itself.

This is no bad way into the feast which we celebrate today. For the talk of kingship in many circles is nowadays anachronistic. Most nations now don’t have kings, and when they did have kings, those monarchs were too often, albeit not always, pretty beastly to other people. Kingship frequently came in the same sentence as bullying and bellicose warlike behaviour. So what does this say of Christ as King? Our readings offer us three models.

First, Jeremiah - whom we should not forget was a constant menace to kings, nonetheless points to the importance of King David. Certainly David gave Israel its sense of nationhood. Like the rest of us, he inherited his share of flawed humanity. The story of David staging the death of Uriah the Hittite in order that he might steal his wife is perhaps the most dastardly moment. David repents and is punished. Still he gave Israel its identity and that is why the gospels are keen to show Jesus as coming from the house of David. David was an iconic figure.

Second, Paul’s letter to the Colossians takes us literally into ‘another world’, a world of cosmic proportions. Jesus Christ is described as ‘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. . .’ This image is of the so-called Pantokrator, the ruler of all creation. It is the image you see painted onto the ceiling of the *main* dome of all Orthodox churches. Christ reigns benignly but in one sense, powerfully over all things. Here is the ascended and glorified Christ.

Third, in Luke’s Gospel passage, we encounter another entirely different kind of kingship: ‘The soldiers mocked Jesus. . .saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”’ There was also an inscription over him: “This is the King of the Jews”. Later on, of course, one of the other two crucified with him begs of him: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Here is

an extraordinarily ambiguous picture of kingship, an ambiguity amplified by reading the dialogue at Jesus' trial. 'You say that I am a king', Jesus replies to his accusers – it was not Jesus' own claim. All this is just before he is crucified. Now we have a *crucified king* – or whom one theologian described as 'The Crucified God'.

In this context, Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, *Woodbine Willie* of the Great War wrote these powerful verses:

'And I hate the God of Power, on his hellish heavenly throne
Looking down on rape and murder, hearing little children moan.

...God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on the tree,
Broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me.
All that showy pomp of splendour, all that sheen of angel wings,
Was but borrowed from the baubles that surround our earthly kings.'

The experience of the death and suffering, which we were remembering last week on Remembrance Sunday helped re-cast Studdert-Kennedy's understanding of Christ's Kingship. It was a different vision, yet more powerful than before. But it was a power rooted in vulnerability, self-giving to the point of death, and so in one sense, weakness even.

'What would the Queen do if they let her out of those railings?' the little girl asked. 'What would Christ do for us if we embraced and followed his ironic upside-down kingship? Releasing Christ from our stereotypes opens infinite grace which transforms all creation over which he benignly yet powerfully reigns.

Amen

Readings

Jer. 23. 1-6.

Col. 1. 11-20.

Luke 23. 33-43.