Sermon for Last before Advent Year B

Readings: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

I

David’s last words as recorded in our OT reading are David’s own assessment of his reign as king. More likely, they are the words later generations put into his mouth when David’s kingdom had become the “good old days”, a lost “golden age” to which Jews fondly looked back with nostalgia and looked forward to in hope as the blueprint for a future messianic kingdom.

David’s reign has been a little idealised – his adultery with Bathsheba and his conspiracy to murder her husband, Uriah, conveniently airbrushed out of the record. But the good points remain valid. David had been chosen over his elder, more physically impressive brothers by God through Samuel; the many psalms he composed testify to his status as ‘Israel’s singer of songs’; he had generally ruled with righteousness and in the fear of God and eventually carved out a period of peace and prosperity for a few years from incessant warfare with Israel’s neighbours.

After David’s death, the kingdom would soon be dragged back into further warfare, eventually costing the lives of Solomon his successor and Jonathan the royal prince, and the kingdom itself would soon splinter into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. David’s days were, in comparison to all subsequent generations, golden years.

The crucial aspect from the point of view of the Bible is that good kings are those who remain faithful to God and God’s moral commandments (and David’s moral slip with Bathsheba seems to have been an isolated incident). Wicked and unworthy kings are those, according to the Bible, who either reject God in favour of some other gods, or who listen to false prophets rather than true prophets.

Such a method of distinguishing between the good and the bad seems hopelessly naïve today. Only this morning I heard a member of the public on a talk radio show attributing the breakdown of family life and the rise of child neglect to the demise of religious practice and its moral values. How quaint and old-fashioned that sounds nowadays. But is it really so wide of the mark?

Is the Bible not pointing out a self-evident truth that the moral character of the king or leader of any enterprise will shape the moral character of the organisation? We all know the well-worn phrase that a ‘fish goes rotten from the head’. There are plenty of examples when narcissistic, cruel leaders have corrupted whole nations. There are quite a number at work in the world as I write. History is littered with such human disasters.

Religion is and never was a matter simply for private life; religion shapes a person’s moral attitudes and they inform the choices that will be made – and those choices bring blessing or misery on those who have to live with the consequences. In so many western democracies the religious views of our political leaders are scorned. We are told they should keep religion out of politics. In a sense they are right, if that means inflicting narrow partisan views of your religion upon the rest of society, but surely, religion in the sense of the moral character of the politician is as good an indicator as any of the likelihood of a good premiership or presidency.

Not that religious labels can guarantee anything. It is not the claim to religion for public respectability which we require, but religion of the heart, religion that motivates the person to make difficult choices on moral grounds even when those choices are unpopular or at personal cost.

II

In our reading from *Revelation* we hear the uncompromising claim of the Christian faith that there is one ultimate authority in this world – Jesus Christ. He claims ultimate authority over all kings and earthly governments, all CEO’s, all supra-national organisations. It is quite a claim!

Christians now belong to two worlds. They have their ongoing duty as citizens of their earthly country; as Paul enjoins upon the believers in Rome:

Everyone should submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established (Romans 13:1).

We may wish to nuance Paul’s words a little more in the light of history, and say, there is no legitimate authority that does not submit itself to God. But Paul’s words were sufficient unto the day because they were trying to play down the more headstrong among the faithful who understood they had new, other-worldly allegiances because of their baptism into a new faith, but who took that as licence to disregard the existing powers of state.

So, says Paul, pay your taxes (Romans 13:6-7).

Today, we have the opposite problem of too many Christians being too embedded in their worldly kingdoms that they fail to live according to the values of their heavenly, eternal kingdom. Too many of the faithful have become Sunday morning only citizens of heaven.

Rev 1:4-8 reminds us that we are now citizens of the King of kings; we are a kingdom of priests. One day Christ shall return in judgement and he will judge according to the values of his kingdom that overrule the kingdoms of the earth.

This is the challenge the Church brings to the world’s governments and power structures. It is not that the Church herself should rule the earth. When the Church tried that in medieval Europe it turned into a disaster from which it needed a root and branch Reformation. But it is the Church’s mission to proclaim Christ’s ultimate rule over the whole world – however unwelcome such a message might be.

III

In January 1077 at Canossa in Italy, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Henry IV, walked barefoot to seek forgiveness from Pope Gregory VII who had excommunicated him.

The Pope made Henry wait in the cold, on his knees in supplication, for three whole days. Whatever the merits of the argument in favour of ecclesiastical positions being made by the Pope and Church authorities rather than by kings and secular lords, the episode epitomises the uneasy relationship that has existed between Church and state over the years. Those questions of boundaries pertain still today.

Some states have declared themselves secular – and enforce that to petty degrees such as banning crosses in classrooms, or public carvings of the 10 Commandments on university campus. Others have ‘established’ churches such as the mild and somewhat feeble Church of England that is held in a mixture of affection like that accorded a maiden aunt and the sort of disdain usually reserved for a precocious schoolboy who keeps interrupting the adults’ conversation to proffer his advice.

Others, especially in the East, have state churches that seem like the mouth piece of government. It is not easy to get the balance right.

In today’s gospel reading, we see Pilate, the first earthly authority figure who had to deal with this question, struggling to understand what kind of authority Jesus possessed, if any. Is Jesus a king, or not? If so, what authority does he have?

If his kingdom is not like any earthly kingdom which would have an army fight on Jesus’ behalf against Rome, just what kind of kingdom is it and what sort of authority does it bear?

That question is not just for governments and leaders of our industrial, commercial, educational and scientific enterprises to think upon. It is the ultimate question to us all. Each of us must decide what we make of this challenge by a man from Nazareth who lived 2,000 years ago.

Is he a king? What authority over my life does he have?

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