

Sermon for Evensong on the Feast of Christ the King – 24th November 2019

Readings: 1 Samuel 8. 4- 20

John 18. 33-37

Charles Caleb Colton, an eccentric cleric of the early 19th century, wrote “Power will intoxicate the best hearts, as wine the strongest heads. No man is wise enough, nor good enough to be trusted with unlimited power.”

Power is an addictive intoxicant; it tempts control of everything, can often lead to abuse and it's hard to release it once you've got it. Unfortunately, we can see this in not just a significant handful of world leaders but also in leaders of companies, organisations, and even churches and households... Wherever one person is given power to lead others, there is the opportunity for that power to be abused...

Of course, leadership is important. From the very beginning, God called some of God's people to leadership... God encouraged Moses to lead his people out of slavery and into the desert. And when Moses was old, God raised up Joshua, who led the people in the conquest of Canaan. After Joshua, God raised up 'judges' as leaders during times of crisis.

The last of the judges was a man called Samuel.

And Samuel was a good judge, who walked in the ways of the Lord. But his sons did not. Instead they “turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice”.

And so the people feared them and didn't trust them to take on the mantle of leadership, so they cry out for a new form of government.

We want a king to govern us, like other nations...

Samuel, naturally disappointed by this, turns to God in prayer, who tells him;

“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”

And knowing the way power corrupts and God tells Samuel to warn the people about what a king would be like...

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you...” says Samuel

... he will make your sons join up in his army, to work at his command in driving chariots, and making weapons...

... he will take your daughters, to feed him and adorn him with opulent scents from his perfumery

... he will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and your orchards and will share them round his inner group of followers.

... he will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and one-tenth of your flocks...

We will want power, and prosperity and possessions and always more and more... And you will be his slaves...

God, says to them... you know what earthly kings are like... you were in Egypt, you saw Pharaoh and his unrelenting drive for more and more power. You were slaves and I heard you crying out... But now... Now you're making the same mistake...

“And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you”

And how often have we, in our human stubbornness, closed our ears to sensible advice and ploughed on regardless...

“No! we are determined to have a king over us, so that we will be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

And how often have we, in our human propensity to follow the crowd, made important decisions based on wanting to be like everyone else...

And so enter the period of Kings...

Saul, the first King appointed, makes a favourable first impression. He is young, tall and good looking, he is initially filled with the Spirit of God, and he hides at his coronation, not sure he wants power thrust upon him. But it doesn't take long for things to change. Soon he finds he enjoys that power, he forgets who called him, and when he feels his power waning, he chooses his own ways over God's ways.

The second king was David, the best king Israel had ever known. But even he abused his power; taking what he wants when he seduces Bathsheba and conceives a way for her husband to conveniently die in battle.

For those with the absolute power of a king, it is easy for them to forget who are and why they are where they are...

And just like there were good judges and bad judges, there were good kings and bad kings...

But today, we remember that Jesus is a very different kind of king... He is a king who rejects the old power games of leadership and who always remembers who he is and what his purpose is...

Our Feast of Christ the King is also the last Sunday of our Church year and over the last year, we have frequently seen how God views power...

So in Advent, we saw how, God chose not to give the power of knowledge to the Emperor Tiberius or to Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea, or Herod the ruler of Galilee, or to Annas and Caiaphas the high priests... But instead the word of God came to a man named John...

Then we saw at Christmas, how, instead of choosing for his Son to be born in a palace, he chose a teenage girl, to give birth in an outhouse...

We saw at Lent, how, when that Son was shown all the kingdoms of the world and offered authority over them all, he refuses temptation and reminds the tempter that the only one worthy of our worship and service is God.

And during the year, we saw in Jesus' ministry how, when his disciples get an inkling of who is might be, instead of claiming the title he tells them to keep it to themselves and how he told parables about choosing the lowest place at the table and how the whole kingdom of God belongs to a little child.

Jesus never forgets who he is and how he should use his power...

"Are you a king?" demands Pilate...

"You say that I am..." Jesus replies... "But for this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth"

Jesus came into the world and he showed us what real leadership was like, he reminded us visibly about the importance of speaking truth to power... and he showed us that real kingship is not going out before to fight battles, but discerning God's will and leading through service.

I imagine that you, like I, have already been inundated with campaign marketing for the general election. Amongst those that stand, there will be those who truly believe that they are standing for good reasons, to use the power of their position to speak truth, support the marginalised and work for the good of all people. There will also be those standing that believe that 'taking back control' and the strident repetition of populist lies and half-truths will be a more successful campaigning strategy.

And so perhaps the warnings from Samuel about the way power can be abused and the examples of Jesus of how power should be used, are particularly poignant at this time. For we each have a power of our own; we have the power to listen and discern and vote for who will govern us, we have the power to speak up and speak out for truth and justice, and most of all we have the power to love and serve and shape God's kingdom here on earth. So on this feast of Christ the King, let us remember what true power is, and how we should be using it in our everyday lives.