

Sunday 20 November 2022
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Christ the King (Last before Advent)

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

I want to give some thought to our three readings this morning which have been specially chosen for this festival we call Christ the King.

These passages might, on a superficial reading, simply be making the fairly standard point that Christ's kingship and authority are a challenge to most modern human understandings of power. It seems to me that that is a good and important point, and one that can't be repeated often enough, since on the whole we don't generally want to hear it.

The trouble is that these readings, if they are heard at all, are being heard by a society that has got itself into a terrible muddle about 'leadership'. It's no longer possible to hold up a standard, worldly model of power and then contrast it with the biblical model, because there isn't a standard, worldly model of power.

There are all kinds of things that suggest that we don't know what we want from our heroes and leaders, we don't really know what we are looking for. On the one hand, people long for strong leadership, but the minute that leadership does something they don't like, they turn around and accuse them of failing to listen to the people and shout that they must remember we are a democracy.

Or we set up heroes, you know the sort of thing, sportsmen and women, actors and pop stars, whose wealth and opportunity we envy. But then we seem only to be able to tolerate their success for a short time and then we long for them to fail. Their privilege, instead of being an inspiration to us, becomes a challenge, and makes our situation worse by comparison, so we can't wait to discover that our heroes are deeply miserable people. It is much the same with our church leaders. That bishop seemed great when he was appointed but now... then there's that new Vicar, he started well, but... well you know how it goes.

In other words, we are fickle and hard to lead and inspire because we have a poor understanding of our own deepest needs and desires. All we do know is that, whatever those need and desires are, they don't seem to be being fulfilled.

So, what might these three passages teach us about this very situation?

Jeremiah sets out a picture of a people whose leadership has left them fragmented and pulling in different directions - not dissimilar to our own modern culture.

The people are scattered and have lost all sense of who they are. They no longer remember that they are God's people and that they belong together in community. And where does Jeremiah put all the blame for this? He puts it squarely on the leaders. Jeremiah blames all those who should have shepherded their people, but who instead allowed them to get scattered and lost.

The punishment of those leaders is for them to suffer the same fate they allowed to fall on God's people. They themselves will now become scattered and lost and they will no longer be leaders and men of power.

Instead, in their place, Jeremiah tells us that God will raise up faithful shepherds who will restore that lost sense of belonging and security.

And then, at last, the people will be ready for the coming of the promised Messiah, because they are now in a position to recognise - what was it Jeremiah said... to recognise his reign of 'justice and righteousness' for what it is... that's to say, the imprint of God's very own nature.

If they had gone on with those original leaders they wouldn't have known 'justice and righteousness' if it had been handed them on a plate.

So much for the people of Israel in Jeremiah's time; what about those Colossians that Paul was writing to?

Well, it seems clear that they have indeed come to that happy state where they can recognise the rule of God. They have taken that next step, the one implied at the end of the reading from Jeremiah, and made the connection between their shepherd and God. They have come to see that Jesus has taken them out of confusion, darkness and submission to false leaders and into God's kingdom of free and forgiven people. They have also come to see that Jesus can do this because he is everything that is represented by God's loving and reconciling Kingship.

Jeremiah was looking for a time when his people would be rescued.

Those Colossians, on the other hand, know for certain that they have already been rescued.

Luke, however, tells us that that very rescuer is a man hanging on a cross.

Luke gives us that supreme paradox... a picture of Jesus hanging helplessly in pain and near to death, yet still the King, opening the gates of his kingdom to the bewildered, misled, barely human rabble around him.

As he asks for forgiveness for the crowd, and as he leads the repentant thief into the kingdom, he is, in his agony, still the one whom all thrones, dominions, rulers and powers must acknowledge as Lord of all - Christ the King.

But the irony of it all is that by Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross he makes salvation possible to all, even those who think they are already saved or to those who think there is no hope of salvation.

Have you ever thought of how things would have turned out if Jesus had, in fact, reacted to the jeering crowd and accepted the challenges and saved himself from the cross? The rulers would have perished in their blindness and the first criminal would have been right, there would have been no hope.

But Jesus did die on that cross; he was raised after the third day; and he now stands at the right hand of God. And now, because of that act of sacrifice, we have life. Irony of ironies!

And what about us?

We need to do just what those Colossians did.

Recognise the character of God's reign and really long for it.

We need to borrow the Colossians key, which is the Lord Jesus Christ, and to search for his likeness day by day until we can recognise it and love it.

Amen.