

Ephesians 1:15-23 (with refs to Mt 25)

Served and serving

Christ the King

This Sunday is the last of the Christian worship (or liturgical) year before we begin the cycle again next week with the beginning of the Advent Season. For some time now, many Churches have marked this Sunday as Christ the King or focussed on his reign – as we have done at Old & St Andrew’s. The thing is that even in these days when more people across the world are less inclined to laud monarchs with riches, respect and honour (though there are some notable exceptions) there is still a tendency to think “power and wealth” when it comes to a festival celebrating someone’s reign. And so, the Church globally has, when thinking about the reign of Christ, sometimes fallen into the trap of looking at the traditional picture of an all powerful, extremely wealthy and omnipotent earthy monarch and adding a religious or spiritual element and regarding Christ as that sort of King, only more so – King of kings, Lord of lords. Has it ever struck you as odd that when talking about the Son of God as King of kings, people almost always use the title Christ, rather than the name Jesus? In almost every other context you can virtually use Christ and Jesus interchangeably, but when it come to discussing reign and kingship, we slip unwittingly into referring to him as Christ. There is, or at least there shouldn’t be, any divergence, but our use of Christ the King and our reluctance to talk about Jesus the King maybe suggests that there is more this than meets the eye. To me, it suggests that there is a whole lot more to Jesus’ understanding of kingship, or what it means to reign, than we tend to take for granted.

Servant kingship

We live in a world where unconsciously we link power and wealth together. We expect leaders – whether of nations, businesses, organisations, even public opinion these days, to exercise control, influence, authority (we may shy away from the word power – but let’s face it – power is in there) AND for them to be well off, very comfortable, in many cases – rich. We may moan about it, we may not like it especially if their wealth is way out of kilter with what is “normal”, at times we may be a big jealous, though probably not of them being open to such public scrutiny. But the fact is that there is a clear link between power and wealth. Sometimes, God is pictured as or likened to an all powerful kingly potentate, sitting on an ornate throne, remote and aloof from his people passing judgement and determining their futures almost in an arbitrary fashion. The sheep and the goats passage from Matthew 25 can be read that way. But without ripping pages out of the Bible we need to ask isn’t there more to Jesus’ kingship than that? Ephesians 1 speaks about Jesus’ reign too and about the mighty power of God but it centres not on dominating people but rather raising us to life and fellowship with him, with God and with one another in and through the Spirit that raised him from the dead. In many ways the cross was Jesus’ throne. A human instrument of torture, humiliation and execution served as the throne of the Son of God as he took upon himself the sin and suffering of humanity and, in love, transformed everything – love triumphed over death, forgiveness over sin, service over power and wealth, good over evil. We’ve heard it many times before but it needs to be said again – Jesus’ reign is based on love and service, not on power and wealth. That attribute, quality, trait, DNA, call it what you will is so basic, so fundamental to God’s way of thinking, being and doing that it trumps ever other – love conquers all. And being so basic to who God is, who Jesus is and what he is about, it MUST figure in us, in the way we think, speak, act, indeed in who we ARE,

if we are to live in line with God's purposes – if we are to live like Jesus. There's no way we can do that on our own, it just isn't in us BUT Ephesians speaks about God's Spirit working in us so that together in Jesus his reign of love, his loving purposes for all humanity can be worked out – not just at the end of time, but day by day, right now as his love is shared and lived out. I think of Jesus' reign being marked, not as we think of him sitting in fine clothes, perched on a high throne, but in among people, sharing his love, encouraging, forgiving, feeding, clothing and serving. Jesus became one of us, that he might raise us to life and love with him. Fellowship rather than division, love rather than hatred, serving rather than adulation is the way forward. And if that is true for Jesus, it ought to be true for us. The passage says The power at work in us who believe is the same as the might strength which he used when he raised Christ from death. God has put everything under Jesus' feet. But it just isn't in Jesus' nature to revel in power – the nature of his kingship is loving service and that needs to be the hallmark of our lives too.

A difficult passage

I'll be honest with you – I find the Matthew 25 passage scary = you know the sheep and the goats, left and right hand, condemnation or salvation – on the basis of whether or not we helped those in need of not. Clearly there is a priority in God's nature towards the poor and the needy, to those who are ignored or written off by society – in the words of a Christian book from my younger days “A Bias to the Poor”. The Church of Scotland has adopted something of that in their marks of the Church – and there is no denying that Jesus demonstrated a readiness to go out of his way to reach out to the poor and vulnerable. It is a haunting prospect. Yet, while it is probably the most challenging and difficult passage in the Bible for many, and certainly one that ought to make us both reflect and up our game in terms of seeking justice for the poor

and serving those in desperate need – out of love for Jesus – I cannot accept an overly simple conclusion that we are saved if we serve the poor, we are condemned if we don't. The fruits of salvation ought to be loving service, and our failure to implement social justice and address the abject poverty across the world certainly challenges our understanding of Jesus' priorities and raises big questions for the "rich north". We mustn't simply sweep these difficulties away or pretend that they can be ignored or dealt with in a perfunctory way by a donation to charity. All that we give helps, but those who are calling us to act more decisively to address inequalities, as an act of natural justice or in biblical terms so that we truly align ourselves with Jesus' loving purposes are right – we must. However, I am clear that that is not a precondition of salvation but a consequence of it. There is too much in the scriptures, there is too much in what we know of the person and character of Jesus to suggest that we are saved by works, rejected if we fail. I suspect that the Church should be much less polarised between faith and works, belief and practice. I am absolutely convinced that our salvation is based not on us proving ourselves worthy of God by doing good works and earning some kind of spiritual credit that will earn us acceptance by God. That just doesn't square either with what we read in the Bible or deep down what we know about ourselves – there's too much in us that is unworthy of God. If that was a possibility why on earth would the Son of God died on the cross for us? Salvation is undeserved, by grace in Jesus, out of his love – and we need to be honest and humble enough to recognise that. But grace calls for a response and out of love for the free forgiveness we have received in Jesus, we are called to love, follow and serve him and our neighbour for his sake. He even equips us by his Spirit so that we can play our full part in loving service. Perhaps we have underplayed that – is our share in Christ's reign, spoken about in Ephesians, maybe more about participating with Jesus

in his mission of love and service to the world now, more than it is lolling about in comfort in heaven. If loving service is so fundamental to Jesus' nature, then the love of Jesus in us should be demonstrated more obviously in our loving actions towards others. The issue is not DOES Jesus reign but HOW does he reign? And scripture is clear – he reigns not by power or wealth, but by loving service – and by his grace that needs to be seen in our lives too. Read Matthew 25 – let it be a challenge to all of us to be more assiduous in loving our neighbour for Jesus' sake, but it becomes far less scary if we are willing to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ and his love – AND are prepared to allow his Spirit to work in our hearts and minds so that our actions as well as our words bear out his loving purposes in our community and in the world – including our love towards neighbours near and far who are often ignored or rejected. Christ is king, but the Servant King. We are servants of the servant king and are called to love and serve him and our neighbour.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.