

Sermon for 23rd November 2025 – Year C – Christ the King

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

It may not feel like it, but this is the last week of the year for the Church. Before the new year begins with Advent and our vigil of waiting for the birth of Jesus, we end with this feast day of Christ the King, a celebration of Christ's role as Lord of all, in heaven and on earth. And in honour of this, we are given readings which speak about the humble and compassionate way that God intends for all leaders to behave, and which Christ exemplified - which is fundamentally different to the domineering selfishness that we see in many rulers of today and throughout human history.

So, if we feel any frustration or perhaps resentment towards our leaders over the last few years, we may find a ready friend in the words of Jeremiah the prophet:

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” says the Lord. “It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So, I will attend to you for your evil doings,” says the Lord.

Jeremiah was active in the last days of the kings of Judah, before the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem around 600 years before Jesus was born. His words are seen as a particular condemnation of the last two kings before the exile to Babylon – Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. It was typical in those days to refer to leaders as shepherds of the people, so Jeremiah's prophecies are intended to reflect God's disgust at the way these leaders have focused on enriching themselves, rather than serving, protecting and enacting justice for the people, and especially for the poor and oppressed.

We only have to go back one chapter to find out explicitly what these kings have done wrong. Jeremiah Chapter 22 verse 3 is directed at the king and says: “Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans and widows. Stop murdering the innocent!” He continues in verse 5: “If you refuse to pay attention to this warning, I swear by my own name, says the Lord, that this palace will become a pile of rubble.”

God, speaking through Jeremiah, is not blaming the people – the sheep of his pasture – for their own situation. He is blaming the ones who were supposed to be shepherds, the ones who had the power but chose to use it to enrich themselves at the expense of others. These are the ones who, according to chapter 22 verse 13, built a palace for themselves with forced labour, panelling it with fragrant cedar and painting it a lovely red.

Jeremiah’s words could be very blunt. No surprise the kings did not like him very much. Those of you who like homework might like to read Chapter 22 later when you get home and I’ll leave it to you to decide which modern leaders might need to hear a similar message.

But there’s more to Jeremiah’s words than simply a threat of destruction.

Through Jeremiah, God promises to do himself what these kings should have done. He promises to gather together the remnant of the flock and bring them back into the fold, where they shall be fruitful. He promises to raise up new shepherds who will be faithful, so that the people will no longer be fearful, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing.

And it’s in verse 6 that God promises a new king from the house of King David, who will rule wisely and bring justice and righteousness to the land. The Christian faith later came to regard this as pointing towards Jesus, and so we

have this feast day to celebrate the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jesus is the king we were longing for.

But wait. Jesus was never a king on earth, not in the sense that Jeremiah would have understood it, and probably not in the sense that Jesus's disciples would have expected it. In fact, his kingship looks little like any other leader you or I have ever known.

There is a 600-year gap between the Old Testament prophecies of Jeremiah to the Gospel story of Jesus' last moments on the cross. And what a contrast! Was this the sort of kingship God was promising? A man dying in humiliation having held no public office; a man mocked by the Roman oppressors, by his own people, even by one of the criminals being executed alongside him.

"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!"

"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

"He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God."

This is a different sort of king. We look at the torture of an innocent man on the Cross, and we too may catch ourselves wishing he had chosen that moment to truly exercise his power. Imagine if the nails had popped out of his hands and feet and he'd floated down to the ground shining brilliant white like a movie superhero. Why not use all that divine power to force the world to be what it always should have been? I even find myself praying sometimes, "Lord, why did you let the evil win?" before I have time to remember that the Resurrection was coming just a couple of days later.

King Jesus is a very different kind of king, who refuses to use power to help himself, but only to help others. Even on the Cross, he is still at work, forgiving the second criminal who recognises that Jesus' kingdom is not one of worldly power and who asks to be remembered. "Truly I tell you," Jesus replies, "today you will be with me in paradise." What unspeakable joy these words must have

brought to a dying man, a convicted and confessed thief. The last act of the tortured and crucified shepherd is to bring one final sheep back into the fold.

Is this kind of kingship challenging to us? Do we prefer our kings and leaders to be superheroes and strongmen who always return to smite their enemies in the end? Do we secretly want to judge whether other people are worthy of heaven, and get upset when unworthy people like this criminal are let in? Perhaps we would prefer it if paradise were exclusively for the nice, clean, well-behaved people. But thank God this is not how the kingdom of Love is. God's kingdom is open to all who desire it, not just those who deserve it.

The thief who repents on the Cross has no evidence that such a kingdom exists, has ever existed, or will ever exist, and yet in his most hopeless moment when all is lost, he is the one who recognises that Christ is indeed a king – the king of our hearts, and of the universe – and by that recognition, he too is saved.