

Homily For The Solemnity of Christ The King 2009

The people of Israel had a somewhat uneasy relationship with kings and kingdoms. Way, way back, perhaps a thousand years before the birth of Christ, the elders of Israel came to Samuel, who was then both judge (in the sense of ruler) and prophet, and told him that they wanted to have a king like all the other nations. He warned them that this would lead to terrible consequences. He told them that the king would take their sons to fight for him, and their daughters to wait on him; he would take the best of their servants, their animals and their crops. They would not listen: 'No, we are determined to have a king!' they replied (1 Sam. 8.19). So God gave them what they wanted, and soon enough Saul was anointed as king.

The history of the monarchy was a chequered one. By and large the prophecy of Samuel came true, and there were many times when the people regretted having a king; there were other times when they should have regretted the actions of their king, but he had led them so far astray that they did not even realise how wrong he was. There were some good men as well as some bad ones, but one period in history shines out as a golden age of kingship, and for the rest of time the people of Israel would long for another king such as this. They longed and hoped for another David. Unlike his predecessor, Saul, David was a man in tune with God. He was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13.14). So ideal a king was David, ruling the nation in obedience to God's will, that God promised to establish his kingdom for ever (2 Sam. 7.16). David turned Israel into a real kingdom, a solid stable place. But this was not to last. David's son, Solomon loved many foreign women, and in his old age they swayed his heart to other gods (1 Kings 11.4). The worship of the one true God, which was the nation's unifying force, became diluted, and within a few years of the death of Solomon the country was split into two and first one part, then the other, was invaded and destroyed. Although David was a man with his faults, it was in his day that the nation really stood out, strong, united and faithful. There was a great longing for another golden age, and for the eternal throne which God had promised David to be restored.

Then Jesus appears, and he begins to preach with the words 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand' (Mt. 4.17). Talk of the kingdom is at the heart of Christ's preaching, and there is no doubt at all that when people heard this the first word that would have come to their minds would have been 'David'. Then they would have found out where Jesus was born: in Bethlehem, David's city. There is absolutely no doubt that when people heard Jesus speak about the kingdom, they would have asked themselves 'is this the restoration of David's kingdom?' (cf Acts 1.6). The kingship of Christ which we celebrate today is inextricable from the kingship of David, the model king, the king of the golden age, the king of hopes and longings.

What can we say about the kingship of David? There is plenty we could say, but there are two things worth picking out today. David was a shepherd-king. When Samuel was sent to Bethlehem to find Jesse and anoint one of his sons as king David was not there. David was out looking after the sheep (1 Sam. 16.11). He was called back from his shepherd duties and anointed by Samuel, but David never forgot his shepherd origins. The people did not want a king who would become their slavemaster; they did not want a king that would consume them to feed his own appetite and greed; they did not want a king who would sacrifice them to ideologies; they did not want a king who ruled for his own benefit. They wanted a king who would care for them, would

keep them safe, would direct and correct them when needed, but who would rule them for their benefit, not his own. They wanted a king who would treat them as a good shepherd cares for his flock. Centuries later, exiled in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel puts into words the people's longing for such a ruler. 'The Lord says this: I myself shall take care of my flock...I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the injured and make the sick strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy, I shall be a true shepherd to them.' (Ezek. 34.12,16). Jesus picks up exactly this image when he says 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10.11).

So, Jesus is a king of the same sort as David. In his kingdom he will rule as a shepherd, feeding his sheep and caring for them. One of the most touching stories about David is the story of Meribbaal. Saul was dead, and so was Jonathan, Saul's son who had been David's friend. Out of love for Jonathan David asked if any of the family had survived, and he learned that Jonathan's crippled son Meribbaal was still alive. So he restored all the family lands to Meribbaal, and made him a promise: 'you shall always eat at my table' (2. Sam. 9.7). So for the rest of his life Meribbaal ate at David's table, as if he was David's own son. Just as the shepherd feeds his flock, the shepherd-king opens up the hospitality of his table. The generosity which David showed to one person, Christ extends to us all. Like the best of shepherds, like the best of kings, he sees that his people are fed. We are invited to his table 'like one of his sons' and to each one of us the Lord says 'you will always eat at my table'.

The kingdom which Christ initiates, the kingdom of God, is ruled by him not as an autocratic despot, but as a shepherd-king. But he is also a priest-king, as David was. When David finally captures the city of Jerusalem, and at long last there will be a capital for the nation, a place which can be both its political and its religious centre, finally there can be a permanent resting place for the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the tablets of stone given to Moses. This is a most significant moment. After long years of wandering this precious shrine, the central point of the nation's faith, is going to come to a permanent resting place. Who will take charge of the religious rites and ceremonies that go with this? It is not one of the priests, it is King David. David dances before the Ark with all his might, wearing not his royal robes but a priestly ephod, and when the procession arrives in the city it is David who offers the sacrifices. Not only is he a shepherd-king, he is also a priest-king. When Jesus begins to preach the kingdom of God, he is introducing a kingdom to be ruled by a priest. Sacrifice, the basic business of the priest, is to be one of the distinguishing marks of this kingdom, but it will not be birds or animals that are sacrificed; all such sacrifices have had their day, because the priest now offers himself. Priest and offering are one and the same.

The kingdom we belong to, the kingdom which is made visible in the church, is very different from earthly nations. David's kingdom was a shadow, Christ's kingdom is the fulfilment. It is a kingdom where shepherding and self-offering are the marks of greatness, and by its transparent goodness and justice it is a life-giving kingdom that stands in judgement on the tawdry powers that we construct for ourselves.

(You can read more about the Kingship of Christ and the Kingship of David in Scott Hahn's 'Reasons to Believe' (Doubleday, New York, 2007) chapters 11 to 14.)