



Feast of Christ the King

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 21 November 2021

READINGS

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12, (13-18); Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

The need for a hero

Greetings Friends. Before beginning, let us pray: May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Allow me to begin by asking this question: who would you say is the most celebrated figure/character of the bible, apart from Jesus? I think many, if not most people, would say David. Until preparing for this homily, I had not really thought about this fact. For those who were brought up within the Judeo-Christian tradition, I suppose this is taken for granted.

David, again within the Judeo-Christian tradition, functions as a cultural hero. He embodies and epitomises all of that which such a tradition holds in highest esteem and regard. David was a warrior (he defeated Goliath, broke the jaw of a lion, and paid a ransom of 200 Philistine foreskins for his first wife); David was wise; David was a poet and musician; David was a righteous man who had a heart after God's own; and to some extent, David was also prone to some of the faults and foibles which we are (as his affair with Bathsheba illustrates).

Let us step back for a minute and consider the following fact. There is a universal tendency, across all times and cultures, for any given society to invest a certain amount of its hopes and aspirations, a certain amount of its pride and identity in what we might term cultural heroes. Before providing a few examples, we should keep in mind that talking about such cultural heroes in this way does not detract from their magnanimity. For we must accept that, in the first place, they would have had to boast of great exploits to receive the attention and acclaim they did. But the automatic tendency is to take these laudable figures and place them high on a pedestal, whereafter we attribute to them all sorts of attributes, qualities, and even achievements, which might not be entirely based on truth.

Ancient rulers such as Odysseus, Julius Caesar, King Arthur; more contemporary rulers such as King Shaka Zulu, Gandhi, Ntate Madiba. You see this tendency very clearly in the far east where there is a cult around a political ruler, for example in North Korea, such that the ruler is deified to some extent. I would argue, and please hear me, I'm not saying that Jesus wasn't divine or wasn't God's Son, that this process even applies to some extent to Jesus. I think it certainly applies to David, and there seems to be a modern scholarly consensus which support this.

For example, there exists no archaeological evidence for the kingdom of Judah under David, in tenth-century BCE, at least as it is described in the Old Testament. There is no evidence for monumental buildings in the area dating to this period, and no evidence for fortified cities, which has led many archaeologists – which is unusual since most modern-day archaeologists in Israel are Jewish and so you would think they would want to prove the biblical narratives of David – to see David, at least in terms of the early “kingdom of Judah” more in terms of a powerful chiefdom, rather than a mighty empire (which in any case neither ancient Judah nor Israel ever was). Furthermore, there is no extant reference within Ancient Mesopotamia to David’s kingdom (apart from an inscription that is debated as referring to a Moabite king destroying one of David’s descendants).

Now, again, this is not to say that all of the wonderful biblical stories we have about David have no historical basis. It is in fact probable that many of them do but, at the same time, that many were embellished and elaborated, so as to increase the glory and splendour and majesty of the Davidic dynasty. As we have said, this is a normal and natural tendency when it comes to cultural heroes. The main issue regarding this whole phenomenon is perhaps how it relates to our interpretation of Jesus and his ministry. For we know that both Jews and Christians understand the Messiah to be of Davidic descent. Christians believe that Jesus was a descendent of David (as it happens, in verse 11 of today’s Psalm, God says to David, “One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.”)

Certainly, Matthew and Luke both saw it necessary to trace the lineage of Jesus back to David. This is why they provide us with genealogies although, interestingly, there is no agreement between the two genealogies when detailing Jesus’ descendants between David and Joseph. Most modern critical scholars see the genealogies as inventions by Matthew and Luke and, although this is likely the case, both are trying to communicate something theological about Jesus’ identity.

It seems the Gospel writers themselves were suffering some of the same illusions besetting the Jews of Jesus’ day which was namely that Jesus would come in the fashion and mould of King David, a political and cultural hero, majestic, mighty, powerful – someone who would vanquish the enemies of Israel and restore Israel’s former glory as it had been in David’s time.

While we can understand why, from a theological point of view, Jesus would have to stand in the line of David, we know that ultimately, at least on a superficial level, Jesus was not a king or Messiah in the shape, mould and fashion of David. And so he says to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would have been fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.” (John 18:36) He doesn’t say that his kingdom is not in this world, but that it is not of this world. In the same way that, in the High Priestly prayer, he says that he doesn’t pray that Father take us out of the world, but keep us from the evil one. In the same way that Jesus says that “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed. Nor will they say, ‘Look, there it is.’ Or, ‘Look, here it is.’ For the kingdom of God is within you/in your midst.” (Luke 17:23)

In his final reply to Pilate, Jesus says, “Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice.” The voice of Jesus therefore does necessarily spark political and cultural fervour, issuing a political rally cry to his people – for he died a culturally shameful and humiliating death; there is therefore no reason or cause to celebrate him from this point of view. Jesus’ kingdom is not one that can be perceived with the naked eye; it is not one that consists in brute force and military strength, and pomp and splendour. It instead consists of humility, being humbled, service to others and only those who worship in spirit and in truth can recognise the true authority of Jesus.