

Hymns:

91 The God of Abraham Praise

564 O thou who camest from above

318 Christ, Our king before creation

347 Crown him with many crowns

Readings:

2 Samuel 23.1-7

Psalm 29 (807)

John 18.33-37

Prayer

Holy God break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight o Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In this past week the news has all been of Black Friday and Brexit: deals to be made, bargains to be struck - all to serve an insatiable hunger - something called 'the will of the people.' Listen, you will hear the phrase.

What is this, 'will of the people'? Is it what a leader says it is? Is it the will of a majority who vote in an election for representatives who govern, and whom we entrust with authority on our behalf? Is it the assumed desire to get and keep and hoard paying as little as possible?

Is it the will of a simple majority who voted in a referendum, as for Brexit? Is it measured by opinion polls, or by numbers who march in the streets or crush into shops?

What if the 'will of the people' has been bought or manipulated? Schooled into anxiety by advertising that says without this scent or that soap I am nothing? How do we know when it changes? What do we do when it is wrong, or by definition, can it never be wrong?

What about the 'will of the people' who stood in front of Pontius Pilate when he wanted to release Jesus, calling 'give us Barabus, kill the king of the Jews?' Why should we listen to the 'will of the people'? Because we are afraid of the rampaging mob?

Today is the last Sunday in the Church year before we begin again, next week, with the season of Advent. It is 'Christ the King,' our moment to remember the strength and triumph of Christ across history. Today is about power: a king we hope for, a king we do well to fear.

It is about making something more durable in 'the will of the people' than whipped up opinion measured and bought and sold – a 'will' more nuanced more complicated than mere opinion, founded in the absolute truth that is each person bearing the image of God, no matter how strange to one another neighbours. Christ the King -

An antidote to the power dynamics of the world, be they political or economic or cultural. Let's pause and define some terms - Don't be put off by the language of Kingship, or the word fear, both a bit out of fashion because of the sometime abuse done in their names:

By King I mean the one who challenged Pilate and subverts the authority, kingly and otherwise, of this world in which we live. This one who by the 'will of the people' was crucified, died, and was buried, who rose again. The one who turned over unjust selling tables in the Temple court, and before whom evil will fall. That's what I mean by 'King.' If there is a crown, it is only one of thorns, not of gold.

By fear I do not mean cringing behind the sofa, or lying paralysed after a nightmare – by fear I mean the sense of deep disquiet and awe, the conviction of love and restlessness at the beginning of a long journey. It is what we mean when we say 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.'

The King we hope for, the King we fear.

A few years back, this week, a young woman sat in the front room of my manse and prepared herself for a knock on the door that we both knew was coming. And this knock was from the police, a specialist team who had driven two hours up from London, a team who deal with women and children who are escaped from sex traffickers. This woman had been traded without even knowing it, in another part of the world the June previously, for a little over £1400, then flown to England with high hopes for a new life she had been promised. Hopes which quickly showed themselves to be based in the most vicious of lies as she was traded from club to club, and then to an anonymous house in the Suburbs, from which she had escaped.

When I first met her, she had asked me to make prayers of Thanksgiving over her body, for her escape and momentary safety. Fearful, ashamed, foreign – illegal; no papers or protection – she wanted to give thanks that God our King had protected and delivered her. And so by tiny steps one at a time she had come to the moment in my front room waiting for the police, shaking like a leaf, but waiting with confidence for the knock on the door after which her option to be anonymous would vanish, after which there was no going back.

We have two passages about kingship from the Scriptures: One from David, one from Jesus.

In David's version, of kingship the godless (in which category I include all the evil and battered and inexplicable ruined parts of life) are like thorns – we, and certainly our King, do not touch them with our hands, only with a staff or spear. This is the kind of King I have been, and look at my track record of success! Says David.

I like this foreign policy approach. When evil threatens, this King's strategy is to protect me from it, then distance it from me, and then BURN it. Even the smoke from the fire, the stench of landfill is far from my home and my dear ones. We can pay someone whose face we never see a minimum wage to come and do that dirty work for us.

And that woman sat in my front room, hopeful, fearful - with more damage done to her, and more courage than I have ever had in my life, is this the best she can hope for? A King whose at the best, will pull her back into the protected circle of special people, rescue her from the vast majority who suffer, a lucky escape?

God wanted more for our world than just a few more lucky survivors. And we can do better for that woman. Our God meant to do more, did do more on the cross, and from the grave. Do not sell salvation so short.

Because Jesus is not King David come back on a bigger scale, as if Jesus' victory, his record of Kingship would be just to pull a few more back from the brink.

Jesus the King is a game changer: His hands are broken. He is not safe. His power is different, and he makes more than a temporary victory of one faction over another. His victory is salvation, and his kingdom is already begun – and we are living it - in back streets and shabby offices and tired police and teachers and carers and others all trying to do a tiny bit more of the right thing. Just a tiny bit more, and another tiny bit more, whatever the 'will of the people'. And in our brokenness, his strength, the Kingship of Christ, rises.

We see Jesus' the King in the courage of a single woman or man who dares to hope when everything says you are worthless and everything says I will break you. We see Jesus the King in the choice to sacrifice not just in war, but in peace.

What happened to that woman in my front room? Things were not easy, not all good. She did receive leave to remain in this country – and had help, and gave evidence and worked with the police, and there were good days and some very bad ones. And she learned words to describe what had happened to her that made her realise she was not just a fallen woman, but a survivor of something called trafficking.

And we, any who hope in this King – well we will need to do more than Pilate did for Jesus. We will need economics and politics that make just a little more space – not to pull in a few more lucky ones, or even millions more lucky ones to benefit from British passports or Black Friday sales - but to change the ways of counting success.

If we think the will of the people may be redeemed in Christ's Kingdom and I do – then let it be because each person is beloved of God and precious, because we are neighbours – let us live so as to build something more supple in our awareness of the common good – more flexible, more welcoming, more humble, more kind. That reflects our best, not someone's estimation of our worst.

And we are alive already in the incomplete kingdom – we are living an alternative story already – God says to each of us today you are worth more than what you can buy, more

than your vote, more than your passport. Use all these things, yes. But sit lightly to the power they bring, be alive to the seduction they pose.

Dare to hope in Christ the King. And fear him, because loving him will lead us to offer More than Pilate did - as much and more as that woman did, waiting in my front room all those years back.

Dare to hope in Christ the King - who can speak a word of justice, a word of rebuke to those who try to whip up the will of the people for unjust ends.

Dare to hope, and yes vote, and yes spend, and yes march, and yes work for change – do all these things in the fear of God.

Which is that deep longing restless love founded in awe, whose kingdom is already begun. TO hope for this king is to commit to living in the fear of God. Today and forever.

Glory to God, who was and is and is to be, world without end. Amen.