

[Reading John 19:15-37]

The King is dead! What follows? Long live the King!

“The king is dead, long live the king.”

The origin of the quote comes from France, but it's also applied to the monarchs of England. It was last cited at the coronation of George in 1936. I'm not going to embarrass anybody; we have a queen who's been on the throne for 70 years - 70 years! - can any of us remember that we had a different monarch? I'm not going to embarrass anybody by asking if they were there at the time of the coronation - all right, don't put your hand up: keep that between you and God. It's amazing, isn't it?

Here's a question: What's the difference between offering allegiance to a queen, an earthly queen or Jesus and to God? There are many reasons we may want to kill our king or our queen - it's been known many many times; we only have to look to Russia: the queen's grandfather's cousin was killed by the Bolsheviks in the revolution because they felt it would bring them freedom from subjection of their earthly monarchs. We only need to look at what's happening now to realise that that isn't the case - it doesn't happen that way. Look where they are now!

And we're defined by the one to whom we give our allegiance. If I mention slavery in this talk, please forgive me - I know it's loaded word - but in biblical times one would voluntarily enter into slavery as a career prospect. Paul refers to this in Romans when he talks about us being slaves to righteousness or slaves to unrighteousness. It's a voluntary choice that we make: we offer ourselves to one or the other, either to righteousness or to unrighteousness. It's a choice that we make.

The Israelite system slavery had built into it a release which was called a “Jubilee” - every seven years if you wanted to separate yourself from your earthly Masters you could do that and you could walk away free. The truth is the whole story of the Bible is a tragedy up to the point where we read today: up to the death of Jesus the whole story of the Bible is a tragedy of human beings opting not to follow what God has called them to do, and to follow their own hearts and to seek to serve themselves essentially - when we offer ourselves to an earthly king or queen we're following the flesh; when we offer ourselves to God we're offering ourselves to the Spirit.

Think of Eden. One Commandment. They were in absolute paradise walking with God in the Garden in the cool of the day. They were given one commandment: “Do not eat of the tree. Do not eat of the fruit of that tree.” And they couldn't follow it. They opted to follow their own desires, their own lusts, their own hearts - they followed the flesh.

When they came out, when they were exiled from Eden, they immediately - the people of God immediately - began to offer themselves, their allegiance, to the kings of other nations. This resulted in their slavery in Egypt. Moses brought them out. They were given a Law - the heart of the Law is “Be Holy as I am Holy; be Holy as he is Holy”. They were given temple worship to instruct them as to Holiness, but they couldn't follow it: the people remains stiff-necked and wouldn't bow. They refused to bow. Stiff-necked: that's what it means: “stubborn”, stubbornly refusing to bow to God.

Then we read of the history, and the prophets in the time of Samuel, where because Israel did not worship the Lord, they were judged by the prophet, and the sons of the prophet had also turned away from the Lord, and the people had lost their faith. And they demanded that they would have a king, like the kings of other nations: they said "Give us a king!"

So the lord consented, and the prophet warned them what would happen when they gave them a king like the kings of other nations. He told them what would happen. Do you think they listened? No, they didn't listen – they followed their own hearts. Then we read of the history of the kings of Israel, and if you want a modern day comparison, a cultural comparison, you can think of the TV show "Game of Thrones". You just have to see what happens when we're ruled by a search for Power rather than a Holy God.

Why would we feel more comfortable serving a king, or a queen, that's committed to attaining power through violence committed on others, when we could be serving a Holy God? It's bizarre, but this is the history of humankind. This eventually results in the people again being returned into exile – they're sent out from their land, they're sent into subjection in foreign lands: Babylon and Assyria. And when they finally return to their own lands, they're assaulted, they're invaded and they're occupied, eventually by the worst regime history has ever known, the most brutal regime: the Romans.

But prophecy was given to them. A prophecy was given to them of a deliverer who would come, and this deliverer would be one, not as an earthly king who would be committed to obtaining power through causing violence on others, but one would be committed to obtaining power through allowing violence upon himself. Could not be more opposite.

This was Jesus. 400 years later, after the Prophecy – 400 years later – Jesus was born in Bethlehem, grew up, he proved himself (he proved that he was the deliverer who was to come) but he demanded an allegiance which exceeds that which we give to kings and queens, and even to the Law of Moses. He demanded, and he demands – he commands – absolute allegiance to God, and to his testimony – a testimony of self-sacrifice.

The people grumble again against this king: "I don't want this kind of thing." And they plot his death as John writes: "He came to his own but his own did not receive him." He's betrayed, he's taken before a foreign ruler, and his life is giving their hands: he's crucified and he dies.

We should stop at this point in the story, and put ourselves into the story. How do you think the Jews felt? Were they relieved? Were they happy at this point (they'd just killed their king)?

Have you ever wondered whether they expected him to come back? Or whether even dreaded the prospect of him coming back?

We here today need to seriously consider why the Jewish people preferred the idea of bearing allegiance to foreign occupying powers than to the Lord of the universe as king. We need to seriously consider that.

How often do we actually have to show allegiance to an earthly ruler? How often do we actually have to bow to the queen? I've never bowed to the queen. I've never had to bow to the queen. How does this compare to being asked to subject yourself to a spiritual rule in which you are required to bow at every point in your life? Christianity isn't about submission. Bowing to God isn't about submission, it's about freedom, because every moment you bow to God you free yourself from this desire to be subjected to flesh. That's what it's about: God commanding us to obey. Jesus demanding absolute allegiance is not about submission – it's about freedom. He's

saying – he's demanding us – he's saying “free yourselves from this desire to be subjected to flesh, whether it's your own or anybody else's; subject yourself to a Holy God, subject yourself to the Spirit, because in that is freedom.” That's what it's about.

The most important question in this whole thing is How does our allegiance to a ruler, who causes us to continually submit ourselves, compare to our allegiance to the Lord Jesus, as the risen and ascended Christ, who promises freedom? That's why he died, that's why he gave himself: to obtain freedom for us. This is good news. Isn't it good news?

Dwell on that today, consider that. And I would love at this point to start preaching about the raising of Christ on the Sunday but that's not my gift, that's for Steve on Sunday.

So have a good Good Friday. Bless you.