

Christ the King 2005

Unlike some of my friends, I am rather enjoying the so-called blockbuster series about ancient Rome which is gracing BBC 2 at the moment. In many ways it is rather silly, and like all historical fiction plays rather fast and loose with the facts, but it's a romp, and it has introduced a new audience to the world of ancient history, something which cannot be a bad thing. Indeed, interest in the study of classics among sixth-formers has undoubtedly risen since Hollywood decided the sword and sandals was the way to go, and *Gladiator* was succeeded by *Troy* and then *Alexander*. I thought of those two films when reading the introduction to today's mass which you will find on the front of your pew sheet. It describes the kingship of Christ being modelled on Homeric kings who were shepherds. Now it is true that Kings are called shepherds in Homer – Atreus, father of two kings, Agamemnon and Menelaus, is specifically called “shepherd of the people”, and his son is seen ruling with his staff, but it's a pretty strange reading of Homer which presents kings as genuine pastors: on the contrary, lust for power, conquest and, above all, personal glory, seems to be the dominating influence. Even the heroic Odysseus doesn't actually get his men safely home.

The question of kingship is a live one in my Roman epic as well, since, as we know from Shakespeare if not from classics, the Romans had had no King since the tyrant Tarquin, and when Mark Antony very publicly offered Caesar a crown he did so in order for Caesar, very publicly, to refuse it. Power and control were the order of the day, but the language of kingship was not to be uttered.

The Old Testament, of course, has its own far clearer model of a shepherd king. Generations before David came along, the tribes of Israel had no kings, viewing the office with a suspicion akin to that of the later Romans. An examination of the Book of Judges will reveal that it is a sign of the people's weakness that they ask the Lord to give them a king, and it is Yahweh's fatherly indulgence which finally causes him to produce Saul, the son of Kish, to be anointed as King by Samuel, the Lord's seer.

What is clear from the Old Testament is that the king is the chosen of the Lord. The crisis provoked by the splitting of the tribes, and the creation of a northern kingdom under Jereboam, who rejects the yoke of Solomon's son, is not what we would call simply political. It calls into question the religious, and hence national, identity of all who follow the Lord. Many of the psalms sing of the central representative role played by the King, the Lord's anointed, in the life of the people of Yahweh. It

is no surprise then that those who seek a messiah, an anointed one, do so expecting the political success of that greatest of all Kings, the shepherd David himself, the conqueror of the invading Philistines, the founder of a large and lucrative empire.

We keep the Feast of Christ the King at the end of the church's year to remind us what kingship, what sovereignty, really is. As the psalmist pointedly tells us, the true ruler of all laughs to scorn the petty affairs of men. The reign of God, the kingship of Christ, is a kingship over time as well as space, over heaven as well as earth. Christ, like the Kings of Israel, is the embodiment of his people, their representative in the heavenly court, but this representation is not localized or fixed in time – rather, as our reading from I Corinthians spells out – Christ represents the whole of humanity, he is the recapitulation of that first representative, Adam, the creature of dust, in whom all our weakness and claims to self-sufficiency are seen and played out.

This is extraordinary kingship, a sovereignty which puts our own power structures and political wranglings as firmly in their place as the Homeric pantheon does when dallying with the affairs of Greek kings and princes. However grand and powerful our rulers, God is infinitely more so. Or so it seems. We have, in front of us, an incarnation of divine kingship. All we need do, is pay attention.

What do we know about kings? We know that kings are of royal birth, with grand lineage and histories of spectacular marital alliances traced back over centuries. And we have Jesus of Nazareth, whose mother was a teenage girl in disgrace, whose father was not his father, whose birthplace was at best the equivalent of the shed out the back. We know that kings have courtiers, lords and aristocrats who pay homage from their wealth, who feast, like Belshazzar, out of the spoils of their conquests. And we have Jesus of Nazareth, whose closest companions were ignorant northern fishermen, who surrounded himself with thieves, beggars, prostitutes, and outcasts, who feasted with his courtiers by pronouncing his own death, and their inevitable betrayal. We know that kings have princes and princesses for brothers and sisters, and we have Jesus of Nazareth, who tells us in this morning's gospel that his brothers, down to the very least of his brethren, are those who are hungry, those who thirst, those who are naked, those who are strangers, those who are sick, those who are incarcerated as criminals.

We know that kings are acclaimed by their subjects, who shout for their long life, looking forward to extended and glorious reigns over ever widening kingdoms. And we have Jesus of Nazareth, acclaimed as a king by tottering into the city on a donkey, hailed with nothing richer than leaves and ragged clothes, moving inexorably towards

condemnation and death, pushing on to be lynched by the very mob which now shouts his name in the same breath as that of David himself. And of course, and most obviously, We know that kings are crowned in spectacular ceremonial, enthroned in splendour and majesty, placed on the throne of glory which displays to the world the awesome character of their office, their status and their all too deadly political muscle. And we have Jesus of Nazareth, enthroned not between the cherubim, but between unknown criminals, crowned in blood, clothed with scars, not hailed but mocked, not lauded but ridiculed, taking his seat on the throne of glory which is the instrument of his torture and death. If we think we know what a king is, perhaps we should think again.