

Power and Vulnerability

Sermon preached on the Feast of Christ the King, 22nd November 2020, to the diocese of Guildford

[Matthew 25.31-46](#)

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

So the Crown is back, series 4. The machinations of our monarchy. I wonder who among us has already watched the lot? But I tell you, there's no nation is more hooked on this series than the USA. So proud to have broken free from the trappings of a monarchy back in the revolutionary years of the 1770s, yet still intrigued, fascinated, even obsessed with it ever since.

You only have to watch Hamilton to see how the themes don't grow tired - overplayed as they are by the brilliant Jonathan Groff as King George III singing 'You'll be back'. If you don't know it, I give you full permission to pause this YouTube and watch it. It's my favourite song in that musical. And there are some pretty good parodies going around just now related to the contemporary exasperation with democracy.

The fascination and fear of empire has to do with the exercise of power, and that's where I want to pay attention today as we celebrate Christ the King. I want to explore what Mt 25 reveals about Jesus's exercise of kingship. We're looking at the last chunk of a long section of Jesus teaching the disciples on the Mount of Olives, two chapters that began with the disciples asking about the end of the age. And here, at the end of the age, Jesus describes the Son of Man seated in glory, surrounded by angels attending him. His everlasting reign builds on the picture you find in the OT describing God's reign (for example, in Isaiah 6). That divine reign finds its echoes in the reign of the human kings -

David and so on. It also picks up many other contemporary notions of royal grandeur from the ancient world, but still relevant even now.

Arrayed around this lofty throne are the countless loyal subjects paying homage, and we glimpse the One who wears the crown offering edicts and exercising judgement - separating the sheep from the goats, the worthy from the unworthy. Judgements which are final once issued, that is, with no scope for negotiation or appeal. The reference to the King's subjects as *sheep and goats* possibly reinforces that sense of power vs powerlessness. In that part of the world, certainly to an untrained eye, sheep and goats look remarkably similar to each other - which is to say, at least to the outsider, the exercise of judgement may *present* as rather random. Eeny meeny miney mow. On the one hand here is recognised the ultimate power of this King - to judge as He wills, as He sees fit.

But, I suggest to you, that's as far as the classic stereotype of royal power goes here in Matthew 25. Yes, Jesus is king, absolutely and eternally; but it turns out he is utterly different from any king you've ever heard of before. Why? He *explains* his criteria for the separation of 'sheep' from 'goats': it's directly related to the way his subjects treat him when he is hungry, when he is thirsty, when he is excluded, when he is naked, when he is sick or when he is in prison. What? The king left hungry and thirsty, a king being othered and stripped, His Majesty in hospital or in prison? These things aren't relevant to someone who has the means of protection and the wherewithal for prosperity, don't be ridiculous. The king is in his royal palace, dining at a long table, robed in ermine! It doesn't make sense. He has all the larders and wardrobes in the world! His guards serve to defend his freedom not to enforce lockdown... it's just not possible.

Jesus dares us to imagine this king on the other side of the tramlines. He stretches us to imagine a figure who sets aside his throne for the sake of the poor. At the same time he challenges our distinction between the haves and have nots, between the powerful and the powerless, between the deserving and the undeserving - not least because the kind of king that Jesus is IS one who knows hunger, thirst, exclusion, exposure, sickness and imprisonment. We can read this literally in terms of what happens to him in Jerusalem that leads to crucifixion - each of those six conditions are part of the account. And we can read it metaphorically, in the sense that Jesus so fully identifies with people in these six circumstances that he *is* there, he's always there, such is the extent to which he is Emmanuel, God-with-us. I'm reminded of Matt Redman's beautiful lyrics,

You laid aside your majesty, gave up everything for me,
suffered at the hands of those you had created...

That is to say, the way Jesus exercises power is totally different to any king you've ever imagined before. From here on, this is what the exercise of power in Jesus name looks like. No lauding over; no looking down, rather a coming alongside, even a looking up. In God's kingdom, you will find the king with the least, the last, the lost. Let anyone who claims a position of authority, or anyone climbing a greasy pole beware. With Jesus, power and vulnerability sit close. (Note that a preacher preaches to herself first and foremost...)

And those who thought they knew better, those familiar with authority, those who were articulate and good at raising debate are depicting pushing back. *'But Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'* They don't get it. Whether they don't listen and can't hear or whether they can't or don't want to imagine Jesus is such a place of vulnerability I will leave to your imagination. But for sure in their defensiveness they've just increased the distance and the distinction

between the haves and the have nots, the powerful and the powerless, by their very reaction. A move of course which, consciously or unconsciously, reinforces the power of the powerful and increases the vulnerability of the vulnerable. Here are people who seem more interested in talking about social dynamics than challenging them; more interested in reflecting on pastoral need than responding to it. More interested in winning an argument than rolling up their sleeves.

And so the King spells it out in words of one syllable, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

We have here not only a critique of power, and some advocacy for social action. There's also something important here about safeguarding the vulnerable. Yes, I mean safeguarding, in all the senses that IICSA has shown us just how much we have to learn and heed. Here we glimpse King Jesus exercising his power for the wellbeing of those most vulnerable. He knows his power, he owns his power, and he shares his power - with those most disempowered. We may not all be kings or bishops or teachers, we may feel powerless, yet whoever we are, we all have *some* power - power that can be exercised for good or power that can wittingly or unwittingly cause harm. And here the gospel challenges us: how do we wield it? Does it serve the wellbeing of those most vulnerable? There's nothing more dangerous than the denial of our own power, yet it happens all the time, because each of us knows more keenly our sense of powerlessness in the areas where we're vulnerable. Of course we do. But the challenge is to use our power not for self-protection but for the protection of others. Are we ready, I wonder, to cultivate the habit of look beyond ourselves, and to listen and see and protect those who are truly most vulnerable. It happens in the most surprising places, even in the corridors of power?

Prompted by the Netflix portrayal in *The Crown*, I would point out that such vulnerability is found even in corridors of power. I'm thinking of Princess Diana - a complicated one for sure - yet who could have seen what we now suppose to be true prior to Andrew Morton's biography? Power and vulnerability are not as far removed as we may like to suppose. Someone who on the outside is dressed in finery designed by Bruce Oldfield ... on the inside is hungry and desperate, sick and feeling imprisoned. Jesus would urge us not to be surprised at who may be vulnerable. It may be hard to see, it may be well disguised, but do not too easily distinguish those with power from those who are vulnerable. They sit close. It is possible to have power yet to feel powerless. Indeed I think in fact it's very common, and dangerously so.

Jesus does not deny his power, nor does he forgo his power. Despite his power, he knows powerlessness, not least from harsh experience. And he chooses to exercise his power for the sake of the vulnerable. Never in self-interest, but for the benefit of others.

Meanwhile, at that time when Christ the King is found back on his throne, exercising his powers of judgement over sheep and the goats: don't be trapped into thinking for one moment you're powerless to affect that judgement. The very fact that this King is not yet back is a gift we are offered: the gift of time, opportunity, and empowerment: to seek out the face of Christ among those least likely to know Emmanuel, God-is-with-them. To impact their circumstances, and in turn to impact our own. Perhaps for ever.