

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

THE KING OF THE JEWS

A sermon preached the 20th of November 2016: Christ the King, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Jeremiah 23: 1–6 and Luke 23: 33 – 43.

King of glory, King of peace, / I will love thee; / and that love may never cease, / I will move thee. / Thou hast granted my request, / thou hast heard me; / thou didst note my working breast, / thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art / I will sing thee, / and the cream of all my heart / I will bring thee. / Though my sins against me cried, / thou didst clear me; / and alone, when they replied, / thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven, / I will praise thee; / in my heart, though not in heaven, / I can raise thee. / Small it is, in this poor sort / to enroll thee: / e'en eternity's too short / to extol thee.

— George Herbert, Praise. (II)

In the Ancient Near East, kings loved to be called shepherds. “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23) was written firmly in that context. Kings typically were identified as shepherds of their people. This is what’s behind today’s reading from Jeremiah. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture,” says the Lord.” It’s not sheep herders to whom Jeremiah is pronouncing woe. It’s malevolent kings.

The central, organizing, integrative thread woven through the warp and woof of scripture is the kingdom of God. Once you see that the kingdom is the informing metaphor of the scriptures, you’ll be able to make better sense of them and of our worship.

Israel had kings, but they were never meant to be top dog kings such as the nations had. They were *vassal* kings, always second in command to the Most High. Before they had a king, Israel wanted a top-dog kind of king when they went to Samuel the prophet. “We want you to appoint a king for us. You’re getting kind of old and your children aren’t much use,” they said to him. Samuel took umbrage at that and the Lord told him, “Listen to all that the people are saying to you. It’s not *you* they’ve rejected; they’ve rejected *me* as their king!

They wanted a king like the nations had. And God disciplines his people by giving them what they want. The first mortal king Israel had was Saul who proved to be a grave disappointment. In Hebrew the name ‘Saul’ means ‘you asked for it.’ The Spirit was taken from Saul and put on David. And it’s in David we see what kingship for Israel was supposed to look like. Vassal kingship.

The kingdom of God explains their architecture. The temple was God’s palace; it was set up just like the

palaces of the ancient kings. So was the tabernacle. The tabernacle was the moveable palace that was constructed at the time of Moses and continued for 400 years until the time of Solomon. Israel’s tabernacle was exactly like the moving palace of the Pharaohs. Why would God do it that way? So that his people wouldn’t miss the point that they were being freed from the tyranny of living for Pharaoh to now live for the only one worthy of their unqualified obedience. They’ve got a new king. They’re under new management.

The kingdom of God explains the *Sanctus*. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs each with six wings, with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another, ‘*Qadosh, Qadosh, Qadosh Adonai tse’vaot*. The whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the palace was filled with smoke. ‘Woe is me!’ I cried, ‘I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.’ [Isaiah 6]

The kingdom of God explains *liturgical gestures*. The Bible says we’re to raise our hands in worship. Now, we Episcopalians are not Pentecostals and good form is important to us, so we have the priest do this on our behalf. At the Eucharistic prayer, the celebrant raises his or her hands in what’s called the *orans* position. Throughout the Ancient Near East, this is the way people approached a king, with hands up like in the John Wayne movies. No

weapons. I give up. I surrender. Outside the liturgy, I use the *orans* gesture when I plead with the châtelaine of the rectory or with a referee of a football game.

The kingdom of God explains *what the tithe is all about*. When Samuel the prophet talks to Israel about the king they ask for, he says, “You want a king? He’ll take a tenth of your grain and your vintage and give it to his officials in attendance. He’ll take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants.” [1 Samuel 8] He reminds Israel that every time a king defeats people his subjects give a tribute to the king of 10 percent. You can tell who’s in charge of your life because he gets 10 percent off the top. The Most High trucks no rivals. And so the 10 percent is supposed to go to God. He gets a tithe as a way for the people to confess that Yahweh is their Lord. Pray about this as you consider your finances and St Stephen’s Church.

The kingdom of God explains *why we have the Bible*. If Christianity were just a religion we wouldn’t have a Bible. Ancient religions didn’t have Bibles. The worshipers of Baal. The worshipers of Marduk. The worshipers of Chemosh. None of them had anything like a Bible. Where did the framework for a Bible come from? Kingdoms had them. They didn’t call them that; they called them ‘covenant documents’. The king structured his lordship over his people in an arrangement called a covenant. There would be the suzerain/king and a vassal and then they would call in a god to witness the covenant relationship and they would write down the terms of that relationship in a covenant document. The form of such documents is the exact same form that we get in the first parts of the Bible with the 10 commandments.

The kingdom of God explains the *sacrament*. If St Stephen’s were a social club, then what we call Holy Communion would be instead an amuse-bouche. But we’re members of God’s kingdom, and this is a covenant-ratifying meal. Do you see how that changes everything? After they got the 10 commandments there on Mt. Sinai, Israel ratified the covenant by eating and drinking in

the presence of Yahweh, using an ancient tradition of eating together in order to swear loyalty. When you eat together you are committing yourself to the other. This is why Coffee Connections and eating meals together as a family here or in our homes is so important.

Moses from the mount sprinkles the blood of a sacrifice on the people after they’ve heard the covenant, and they say, “We will obey.” [Exod 24] If God is king, we will obey him. “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” And of the animals that forfeited their lives they then ate and drank in God’s presence, solemnizing that covenant at Mt. Sinai. Jesus takes the same language to say the same thing. “In the same way after supper he took the cup saying, ‘This cup is the New Covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.’”

This is why the Early Church called this meal a sacrament. Cicero in the 1st century BC had defined a *sacramentum* as “an oath of loyalty taken by soldiers to the emperor.” That’s what a sacrament is. It’s an oath of loyalty taken by soldiers to the emperor. At the Mass, we worship by celebrating and eating the Lord’s Supper. It is a sacrament. As we eat it, we’re swearing loyalty to the King of kings; like soldiers, we’re reporting for duty, ready to do whatever the Lord commands! Tertullian the Church Father says, “We are called to an army of God when we respond to the words of the sacrament.”

Today’s the last Sunday of the year, *Christus Rex*. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. As you make a throne of your hands at this altar to receive the body of Christ, as you take his blood into your throats, humbly remember this: Jesus does not come just to get you out of a jam, to put jumper cables on your dead battery so you can get on with your lives six days of the week without him. Jesus doesn’t come to be your guru. He comes to take over. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission
please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501,
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org.*