

A paper crown: 2 Samuel 23.1-7, Matthew 28.16-20

After the excitement of the weekend, we have to wait now till December 1st to begin the Advent Calendar proper. So here is my reflection on the feast of Christ the King.



Jesus said: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Matthew 28.18-20.

What did you do in the lockdown, Granny? I like to think our grandchildren might be asking that question, sometime in the future ... when all this is a thing of the past. When we can look back and say, Yes, my goodness, that was a tough year, wasn't it? — but we got through it, and we had some laughs among the way

Actually, one of the most rewarding and enjoyable things I did in the lockdown was home-schooling my grandson Ben. We decided to have a go at learning Latin, and we found this great book about a mouse called Minimus who lives in a Roman fort on Hadrian's Wall with the family of the camp commandant Flavius and his wife Lepidina and his teenage children Flavia and Julius, Rufus the toddler who keeps getting into trouble (“Noli tangere, Rufe!”) and the slaves: Candidus the British cook (wearing tartan trews), Corinthus the Greek secretary, and Pandora the

lovely nursery-maid. It was a real soap-opera — but it proved a surprisingly good way of learning how language works, alongside absorbing a lot of information about everyday life in Roman times (even down to having a baby in Latin — they didn't tell me that when I was at school!).

So one of the stories is about the festival of the Saturnalia, which seems to have involved a lot of raucous festivities in the middle of winter, when slaves and their masters swapped roles for a day. So one picture shows Lepidina, fussing rather helplessly in the kitchen among Candidus's pots and pans. And another shows Flavius and the kids waiting on the slaves, who are lolling about on cushions and having a wonderful time being treated as kings and queens for a day. Tomorrow they'll be back in the kitchen — but just for a day, they get to lord it over the household and remind their masters that at bottom, we're all created equal (at least in theory).

Fast-forward five weeks from now, and what do we get? A raucous festival of food and drink, where everybody gets to sit down to a feast and pull crackers and put on a paper crown — and maybe feel like a king (just for a day). Sounds familiar?

A lot of interesting things happened when the church decided that the best time to celebrate Jesus' birthday was in the middle of winter. It meant that Christmas became a festival of light, as Robin said on Saturday — at least in the northern hemisphere. And it meant that Christmas absorbed some of the customs and jollity of the old Roman feast of the Saturnalia. That ancient custom of role-reversal, when the lowest in society got to be treated like kings and queens once in a year, persisted in many places across medieval Europe, long after the Saturnalia was forgotten — and I like to think the paper crowns in our crackers are a distant echo of that connection.

There's something disarmingly fragile and ridiculous about a paper crown. It's a reminder of what a wise ruler never forgets, that leadership and authority is a gift, not a right. Whether you're born to kingship, or elected by the people, authority is given to be used with wisdom and kindness for the benefit of others. The authority of the leader is dependent on the mutual trust and respect of the led — which has to be earned, and can never be taken for granted. (The Roman emperor, wielding ultimate power of life and death over millions, used to keep a slave to ride behind him in his chariot as he rode in front of the cheering crowds, to whisper in his ear, "Memento mori" — remember your mortality.)

That idea of role-reversal keeps cropping up in the Bible's picture of kingship. *One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning,*

like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on a grassy land (2 Sam 23.3-4). So said David in his last words — but he never forgot that God had anointed him, the little shepherd boy, the youngest and least important of his family, whom nobody even remembered when Samuel came looking to find the one God has chosen to shepherd his people (you can read the story in 1 Samuel ch.16).

And here at the end of Matthew's Gospel is Jesus, the carpenter's son, on a mountain in Galilee, with a motley crew of dishevelled and shell-shocked followers — fishermen, tax-collectors, a bit of this and a bit of that — and what does he say to them? *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* Go out and conquer the world in my name — baptizing, making disciples, teaching, helping people to learn my way of kingship, just as you have learned it from me. Don't go out as know-it-alls who have all the answers — go as my disciples, as learners who are still learning, who sometimes make mistakes. Because you know what? You haven't left school and graduated — you're still my disciples, and I'm still with you, I'm still your teacher, right to the end of time.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me — Christ the king, the king of the whole world: that's what we celebrate as the Christian year draws to a close. But if you think about it, his beginnings were even more unpromising than David's: born in a stable, his parents weren't even married, becomes a refugee, grows up as a village carpenter's son, rejected by his people, strung up on a cross — the only crown they gave him was a crown of thorns. What kind of a king is this?

A king who is going to turn everything upside-down: *casting down the mighty from their thrones and exalting the humble and meek; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty* (as Mary sang in the Magnificat).

A king who is going to take the world by storm — by the invincible power of love.

A king whose strength is made perfect in weakness.

A king who is born to save his people from the power of darkness and bring them into God's kingdom.

A king who empties himself of all the trappings of power — who leaves his throne

and his kingly crown, who voluntarily strips himself of status and privilege to live among the poorest of his people.

A king who comes to lift them up — to lift us up — and make us a kingdom of priests serving his God and Father (Revelation 1.6).

At Christmas, we all get to wear a paper crown — a joke, a crown that is not deserved, just for fun. It reminds us that kingship is a gift, a grace — dressing up the dirty rascal to look like the king of the castle.

I think that's quite a good symbol of God's amazing grace that takes the pauper from the dust-heap and sets them among the princes of the people, that makes the woman of a childless house a joyful mother of children (Psalm 113). A little parable of the wonderful story of role-reversal that the Christian year opens up to us, from the Babe of Bethlehem to Christ the King — leading us into his kingdom, and lifting our humanity to the heights of his throne.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it brilliantly:

*In a flash, at a trumpet-crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond
Is — immortal diamond.*

God bless, Loveday
© Loveday Alexander
23rd November 2020