

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 14 Year A 2020

We find ourselves once more firmly in the Sundays after Trinity, the green Sundays of 'Ordinary Time'. Yet the readings today, especially the Gospel and the Old Testament lesson, invite us to consider what it means to have Christ as our King. The reading from Zechariah today of course finds echoes and resonances in the gospel record of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is clear that Jesus himself was familiar and used the prophet Zechariah as an interpretative key to his own ministry.

In the OT lesson today, we hear Zechariah prophesying of the return of the king who would restore the glory and splendour of Israel and so bring *peace to the nations*. And this simply replaying a central theme of the Bible. This idea stretches way back to the Genesis account of creation in which Adam is presented as the first 'king' ruling, presiding, over the properly ordered garden. One way to understand Adam's sin is to read it as a suspension, an abandonment of right kingship. The record of Scripture is really the record of God looking for those who will rule in his name and according to his purpose. And that new kingship, that new Adam, would attract the nations so that the whole world would once more be a rightly ordered place. That's the biblical vision. It's the vision that drives so many of the prophets. And in this vision it is the kingship of David which becomes the ideal, the model. Through the prophet Nathan we hear how David's line will last forever. But by Zechariah's time, this had been proven false. At least in a literal, biological sense, David's line had come to an end. Still, Israel continued to dream, continued to hope for this king, this new Adam, a definitive David whose rule would *not* end. And this hope anchored in the idea that through this king *God himself* would come to reign. God would rule *through* his chosen one and gather the whole world into this rightly-ordered rule.

This right-rule, this good order, might seem particularly far from us, especially now. We turn on the nightly news and we see how demoralising it can be! We hear of chaos and violence and disorder and disfunction. But we don't have to look too far though. We see it in our own communities, on our streets, even our own families. And so, in the heart of all us, a longing, a yearning for right-rule, for good government. We want someone (or something) to put it all right. That yearning of the prophet so often is ours! We want to be able to say, *rejoice, heart and soul, daughter of Zion. Shout with gladness, daughter of Jerusalem!* Because we all – or any sane, decent human being – longs for the chaos, the disorder, the violence to end, for things to be set right.

For Zechariah, the king who fulfils all these longings comes in peace. And the sign for this will be that he comes riding *on a colt, the foal of a donkey*. We jump to the conclusion that this means humility. When we read this into Jesus' story, we think that it means *his* humility. But that misses the point. Because the colt in the biblical imagination was the proper mount for an Israelite king when that king was coming in peace. When he comes in wartime, he comes on a battle-horse. But in peace he comes on a donkey. So, Zechariah's prophecy is that sometime this king of peace will arise but who will not engage in battle, in the usual sense of the word. *He will banish the chariots from Ephraim and the horses for Jerusalem. The bow of war will be banished. He will proclaim peace to the nations.* This king will put an end to the ways of war. He's not claiming his peace because he's gained the upper hand, because he's the strong man, the better warrior with a bigger fighting machine. No. He claims his peace by *banishing* the weapons of war! It's a new way of operating. In all the old ways human beings normally conduct their affairs, its violence meets violence, and we never get anywhere. What Zechariah perceives is a whole new arrangement.

500 years after Zechariah, Jesus enters the holy city Jerusalem, *on a colt, the foal of a donkey*. And arriving as the king peace, he introduces a whole new way of ordering things. The sign and guarantee of his mode of kingship is presented just a few days after Jesus' entry to the city. Without weapon, without meeting violence with violence, Jesus comes to the Cross, the throne from which he reigns. Jesus *submits* to the violence of the world. All the chaos, violence, disorder of the world Jesus takes to himself. But in his Resurrection, he shows his lordship, his triumph, his power over those forces of darkness, chaos, violence and disorder. Zechariah's vision of a new order happens in *him*. In *him* the new rule is found and fulfilled!

In light of this, hear then the words of this king of peace in the gospel today. *Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.* These words we must hear spoken to us! *We* are the overburdened. All of broken humanity who labour, who are weighed down. These are words spoken to everyone burdened with the weight of our human condition. So often, though, we cling to the burden of the old world. We cannot shake it off. Violence meeting violence. Hatred meeting hatred. Vengeance giving rise to vengeance. I hate you, you hate me. Your family hates my family. My tribe hates your tribe. And on and on it goes. We are all caught in this thing! We are born into it. It becomes part and parcel of what it means to be human.

St John in his Gospel simply calls it 'the world.' That's what it means to labour and be burdened. And to this Jesus says, *come to me all of you in this situation, and I'll give you rest.* Whatever the burden: come to him! In Christ, the burden is lifted by submitting to his kingship, to his direction and rule.

Whether we like it or not, we are all somebody's slave. We're all slaves to this system of wanting to fight back and get the upper hand. But to this the king of peace says: *take my yoke.* Now, all this of course stands somewhat in contrast to what we heard last week, from the previous chapter in Matthew's Gospel. There we heard how following Christ brings division. He says, *I have come not to bring peace but a sword.* Is Matthew here having a bit of a schizophrenic moment? Is he contradicting himself? Not at all. Chapters 9 and 10 are not in conflict. They don't oppose each other. But they are meant to be held *alongside* each other. Yes, it means that being a faithful follower of the Lord Christ will bring division. Accepting Christ's lordship means we will not accept the other claims of lordship on our lives. That will bring conflict. But it also means we do not seek to pick fights or try to seek the upper hand by clever arguments or even physical violence. Jesus' rule puts a line under that deadly game of one-up-man-ship.

To this Jesus, the king of peace says, *take my yoke.* Yes, we are meant to see ourselves here as beasts of burden, as oxen or cattle, tied under the yoke and under the command of another. It might appear demeaning. But this is what submission to Christ's lordship, to his rule, looks like. It means we serve the purposes of the new king, we go where he wants us to go, we do the work he sets us to. But knowing that in all things not only does he direct and rule, *he walks beside us,* shares the yoke with us. One further way how all the old images of lordship and rule are subverted in the gospel.

The burden of Christ is light because he breaks us free from all the old systems. When we submit to Christ's rule, to his direction, to his yoke, our lives become infinitely lighter, easier, more joyful. Our lives begin to align – become re-oriented - to God's good purposes. What makes our lives burdensome is that we are held captive to the old way of ordering things. But in Jesus, the king of peace, we find a new order, where his power is more powerful than the world. In the mystery of the gospel submit to Christ, fall under his yoke, and we are given the grace and the power to break free. Amen.