

A Servant King - Coronation Sermon

Date: 7 May 2023, 4th Sunday after Easter, Service of Celebration and Prayer for the Coronation of King Charles III

Location: St George's Battery Point

Text: Matthew 20:20-28

“Watching a coronation is the constitutional equivalent of visiting a zoo, and finding a Triceratops in one of the enclosures.”¹ So writes historian Tom Holland. The coronation we watched yesterday was lavish and spectacular, and at the same time outlandish and weird, almost completely out of keeping with anything else we experience in 21st century life. The pomp and ritual have fabulously ancient roots, with the anointing reaching back 3000 years to Solomon, king of Israel, and indeed to Saul as we'll see in a couple of weeks in our sermon series on 1 Samuel. (Just a little plug for weekly church). The costume's seem just as strange, but looking at some photos from the Met Gala ball in New York this week, I can't say that is the case.

Today we're celebrating the coronation of King Charles III. Despite the republican sentiments of many and ambivalence to a British monarch, that living link to our colonial past, he is our King, the constitutional head of the commonwealth of Australia. What are we to do with the ambivalence of this moment? I'm not going to make a political comment, but I'd like this morning simply to explore the central theme of the coronation, and what it teaches us about political authority, the invitation it offers to each of us to live out our true humanity, and how it points us to the King of Kings, Jesus.

The service began with a child greeting the King in these words: “Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings.” To which the King responded: “In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve.” King Charles' words are taken directly from our text this morning, Matthew 20:20-28.

A mother's request.

This text begins with a mother's request. I don't know what you want for your children, but James and John's mother is dreaming big. She has visions of glory for her boys. She asks Jesus, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.’²

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/30/bronze-age-coronation-rites-seem-to-speak-to-a-modern-love-of-the-sacred>

² Matthew 20.21

If Jesus is God's chosen king, then who should be his right and left hand men? Her boys. That means power, wealth, status, respect, influence, glory. It's a vision of the pomp and privilege we saw on display yesterday. We get a sense that James and John and the other ten apostles had bought into this vision in verse 24, "When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers." "How dare James and John get those positions! That's what I wanted!"

Jesus calls all the twelve together to set them straight. What they have in mind is how the rulers of nations commonly behave. Being in positions of power and exercising authority, that means lording it over others. This is about being at the top, with all the perks of position, looking down on those upon which you stand. This is the great temptation of power, pride, that pushes others down and you up. And where the position becomes about simply exerting your will over others.

But Jesus offers a different vision of authority and power. Verse 26.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

True greatness lies in service. This is what we are meant to do with power - serve others, not ourselves. Put their needs before our own. To use the power given for the benefit of others. And so the number 1, the key, the essential virtue for those who are given power and authority is humility. As someone once said: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less."

Beneath the gold and glory, that vision of humble service is everywhere in the coronation service. The King is presented with a Bible, because it is a rule for the whole of life and the government of Christian princes. He is not exercise his own will, but submit to God and serve according to his will. He swears to defend the Christian faith, so that all may live in peace and safety. He is given a sword, symbolising the power to fight against evil and defend the good. With the sword we see the fundamental Christian understanding of the job of governments - to administer justice with mercy. That involves defending the good, and from the Old Testament vision of justice, to protect and care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the refugee. He is given an orb set under a cross, symbolising the realm over which he reigns and reminding him that he does so only under Christ, the risen and ascended king who reigns over all the kingdoms of this world.

Even the crown, the symbol of royal majesty, recalls the calling to service which is the king's task. It reminds us of Psalm 8, which describes humanity as being made a little lower than

the angels, but crowned with glory and honour. “You made them rulers over the works of your hands; / you put everything under their feet.”³

This is the position and the responsibility that God has given to humanity, to rule over his world, fulfilling that task with generosity and care, after the pattern of our Creator whose image we bear. As Charles is crowned king to rule of his realms and territories over which God has placed him, so we see unveiled the dignity and glory with which God crowns each one of us.

The glory of the ceremony and its symbols are designed to impress upon us the weight of responsibility that comes with the crown. In a constitutional monarchy the king does not execute the task of governing, this is done by governments of which he is the head. Even so, the fundamental task of government - administering justice, defending the good and caring for the needy - is writ large in the coronation. And the character of humble service is essential to all who wield authority. Is this not what we want in our governments and leaders? Is this not a vision of leadership that the most ardent secularist could agree with? And if it is true that we as those who bear God’s image are crowned with glory and honour, even as King Charles is crowned, then our humanity finds its fulfilment in humble service.

For all the outlandish pomp and ceremony of the coronation, that true humanity is found in humble service is, for my money, the most radically counter cultural aspect of the coronation. Our culture values freedom as the highest virtue. To be free from all constraints is the supreme expression of our humanity. Dare I say that King Charles’ own life has been a demonstration that this does not play out as the fairytale we tell ourselves. In contrast the Bible gives a robust account of freedom that corresponds with our experience of life. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free,” St Paul writes. “But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”⁴ Unfettered freedom is simply licence to indulge our own selfish desires. The more power you have, the more destructive that freedom can be. Freedom directed towards service, now that brings life and wholeness.

To live out that call to serve requires commitment, discipline, self control, self examination, energy, a single minded devotion, a daily sacrifice of putting others needs before your own. These virtues are not commonly celebrated. They are not flashy, but they are humanity at its best. We saw that sacrifice and service consistently exemplified in the life of our late Queen. But even in her death we saw this vocation embodied by her family. I remember hearing one of her children say, “we were only given one day to mourn”, and then they had to lead the

³ Psalm 8.5-6

⁴ Galatians 5.13

nation in mourning, because Her late Majesty belonged not only to them, but also to her people. We can think of the unrelenting pressure of being constantly in the public eye, the endless public engagements. I'm sure the King could write a book on how to smile and wave given how much of it he has had to do. With this position comes responsibility. To serve requires sacrifice. It is costly. It stretches our humanity to the limit and beyond. It is why at the heart of the coronation is a prayer that the Holy Spirit would empower the King to serve. We ourselves need that power of the Holy Spirit if we are to live the lives of service that God calls us to.

The King entered Westminster Abbey with those words, "I come not to be served but to serve." These echo Jesus' own words in Matthew 28. Why is it that true greatness is found in service, and power is to be exercised in humility? Because Jesus says, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁵

The Son of Man is Jesus' favourite title for himself. Taken from the prophet Daniel, it means one who is invested with all the authority and power of God. Indeed, he is God come in the flesh. And how does he wield his power? By serving, and giving his life as a ransom. We know King Charles is a flawed man. Indeed, all of us fail to live out the call to be truly human, not only in failing to serve, or in lording it over others, but in myriad different ways. But Christ, the anointed King, has come not only as an example which to follow, but first and foremost he came to give his life as a ransom. He offered his life as a sacrifice, to rescue and redeem us from our sin and selfishness, from a judgement we deserve, from consequences we've brought upon ourselves, so that we might be brought into his kingdom and reconciled with God our Father.

In preparing this service we discovered a copy of the order of service for the last time a King and Queen consort were crowned, in 1937 with George VI and Queen Elizabeth. I was surprised to find that nowhere in the service was there an oath of allegiance to the King. Instead there was a prayer of dedication. As the king dedicated himself to the service of God and his people, so also the congregation were invited to renew their baptismal vows, with the king dedicating themselves to God and the service of others. That is the invitation the coronation of King Charles offers us. To give ourselves in service, even to give ourselves to God. Will you give yourself today? Jesus is the true King who reigns in humility, who gives his life in service for our and for me. We will only find the power to follow his example of service when we accept his ransom on our behalf, and bend our knee in homage to him as our King.

⁵ Matthew 20:28