

Shepherds, Kings, and a Divided Church

A sermon for Christ the King Sunday by Nathan Nettleton, 20 November 2022

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 1:68-79; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

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Message

Jesus comes to break us free from oppressive understandings of God and of God's expectations of us.

Sermon

Over the course of the past week, this sermon ran off in several different directions in my head and, fortunately for me, several of them ended up coming back together and arriving in roughly the one place.

Early in the week, when I first looked at the readings, my head was full of angst over what had happened last weekend at the New South Wales Baptist Assembly, when they voted to make a strict conservative position on marriage compulsory for all their churches, and so expel churches like ours and pastors like me who support same-sex marriage. I opened the scriptures, and the first verse of our first reading for tonight said, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord." There's my sermon right there I thought.

But as the week went on, and as I read various analyses of the outcomes of that Assembly from commentators on either side of the debate, I began to see how various verses in our readings tonight could be used to support either side, and I began to ponder why that is and what that means. Another possible sermon.

In the Church calendar, today is called "Christ the King Sunday", and late in the week I found out that we now have someone in the congregation who performs in clubs as a drag king, so I even wondered whether "Christ the Drag King Sunday" might work as a sermon, and it possibly would, but it was a bit late in the week by the time I found that out, and the idea didn't have time to percolate into something useable for tonight. For those of you who are looking confused because you've never heard of a drag king, if you know what a drag queen is, you should be able to work it out!

Today's Bible readings invite us to think about what it means when people describe Jesus as their king, a description which is used in a highly ironic way in the gospels – Jesus is called king because it's obviously the wrong word. But as I thought about that, I realised that the clash of ideas about what it means to call Jesus a king is probably closely related to the clash of ideas that spilled over in that Baptist Assembly last weekend. It's not just different views about marriage, but different views about who Jesus is and what he is on about.

In the biblical stories, the idea of the monarchy was highly contested right from the start. When the people of Israel first asked the prophet Samuel to appoint a king to rule them, God told them through the prophet that having a king would be a very bad idea, and one they would live to regret (1 Samuel 8). But the people insisted that they wanted one anyway, so God gave in and gave them one, but the whole history of the Israelite monarchy was an ongoing vindication of God's original preference and recommendation that it should never have existed in the first place.

The frequent image of the shepherd king was not just a reference to the previous employment of Israel's most famous king, David. More importantly it was an attempt by God to shape the expectations of how a king should govern God's people. It was an attempt to counter the more dominant images of the warrior king who ruled with a drawn sword, or the judge king who imposed laws on the people and policed them rigorously. The ruler of God's people was to care for the people like a shepherd caring for a flock, guiding them to restful green pastures, and leading them beside still waters (Psalm 23), just as God does.

But as I prepared to latch onto that verse from our Jeremiah reading and preach woe to the shepherds who are destroying our Baptist associations and breaking up and scattering the flock, I remembered that I've had this verse used against me by sincere people on the other side of these debates. People have said that by failing to shepherd you along the straight and narrow path of God's law, I am letting you go astray and leaving you lost and scattered and at the mercy of the wolves of error and sin. And you can see that that image of the shepherd works equally well to support that kind of argument. So I can't stand up here and pretend that the image means whatever I want it to mean and those who disagree with me are all hypocritical liars. They are not. Most of them are perfectly sincere.

So even though the image of the shepherd king might have been intended as a corrective, when you hear how people from both sides of a disagreement use it, you realise that its capacity to correct us is often still determined by our previous thinking and by the limits of our imagination of what could be possible. We can't possibly imagine that it could be correcting us in a direction that we are sure God would never want us to go.

You can see something of this too in the way the image of Jesus as king is used in our gospel reading tonight, the story of Jesus's crucifixion. In Luke's gospel, the allegation that Jesus is claiming to be the king was one of the central charges at his trial. Throughout his ministry though, we see Jesus turning the concept of kingship and the kingdom on its head. Whatever kingship or kingdom he is proclaiming, it is nothing like what the people were wanting or expecting. Their imagination couldn't stretch that far.

At his crucifixion, Jesus is finally openly called the king, but only to take the piss out of him. It is outright mockery. Here comes his royal cupbearer, but it is an enemy soldier offering him sour wine, the cheapest goon available. Here is his royal placard, proclaiming him king to all the world, but it is a criminal charge sheet hung over his thorn crowned head. And here are his armed forces, but they are Roman soldiers, jeering at him, "King of the Jews?! Huh! If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

So it's clear what is happening, but is it clear what it means? Again, sincere Christians starting from different perspectives draw different conclusions. There are conservative Christians who value strong hierarchical leadership and respect for authority who will see the irony in all this mockery as a prelude to the shock the world will get when the one they have mocked reappears as the ultimate king of the universe, bringing divine vengeance on his enemies and ushering in the reign of divine law and order on earth as it is in heaven. And if your starting assumption is that that is what God is like, then that reading of this scene makes perfect sense.

But there are others who start from a different view of God who don't think that Jesus was keeping his true nature hidden, but that the way he acted during his public ministry was the true revelation of God's leadership style, and that the irony was that everything the world

thought about kingship in relation to God was wrong all along. So if Jesus is a king, that doesn't mean anything like what we thought it meant, and true kingship is more about the capacity to absorb violence than the capacity to mete it out with authority. When our reading from Colossians said that Jesus is "the perfect image of the invisible God", perhaps that is never more true than it is as he is helplessly nailed to a cross.

It depends so much on who you think God is in the first place. A story might be trying to reshape what we think about God, but it can only reshape what is already there. A story that did a good job of reshaping the ideas of its original hearers might have a very different effect, perhaps even an opposite effect, on a group of modern hearers whose starting assumptions are quite different.

This brings me back to what happened in the New South Wales Baptist Assembly, and why some Baptists are hoping they can achieve the same thing here in Victoria to get rid of the likes of us, and how all that relates to these considerations of shepherds and kings. You see, as I have been reading through the analyses of what happened from commentators on different sides, I've been realising just how much they are talking past each other because their starting assumptions are so different.

Many of those who, like me, were appalled at what happened, have been asking why we can't all be more tolerant of each other's differences on non-core issues. They have talked about the importance of focussing on the central truths that unite us as followers of Jesus, and letting go of the expectation that our beliefs and convictions on non-essential doctrinal issues should be required belief for everyone, or else we'll have to split from one another.

But the trouble with that as an argument is that it is only persuasive if we already agree with one another on which things are "core beliefs" and which are "non-essential doctrinal issues." We might already be able to agree that our positions on non-essential doctrinal issues shouldn't lead to a split, but if what I consider to be a non-essential issue is something that you regard as a core belief, then that agreement gets us precisely nowhere.

Most of us here find it difficult to imagine how anyone could see questions of marriage and sexuality as core beliefs, essential to the gospel, but that is because we have a particular understanding of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom. We are seeing Jesus as one who intentionally overturned people's ideas of God as a moral policeman, and who generously welcomed in those who had previously been treated as unworthy of the kingdom. We are seeing the kingdom of God as a radical change of culture based on love and mercy and breaking down the walls of exclusion and condemnation.

The people who do see traditional understandings of marriage and sexuality as core beliefs, as essential to the gospel, are not doing so because they simply draw the moral lines in different places. They are doing it because they start from some entirely different assumptions about what God is like and what the kingdom that God is ushering in is all about.

Obviously they vary too, but in the mind of at least some of them, the message of the gospel is that God's primary goal and desire is to see the whole world living in a state of holiness or moral purity. So their view of the kingdom of God is a world where society and the individuals in it all live in conformity with a single God-given ideal of holiness. They believe that God has given us detailed laws in the Bible that reveal exactly what that holiness of life

looks like, and they believe that, in Jesus, God forgives our past lack of holiness and sets us back on the path of holiness.

Now if that worldview is your starting point, then seeing a “correct understanding and practice” of marriage as a core gospel issue makes perfect sense. So too for any other moral or behavioural issue. Such a gospel is primarily about a moral reformation, so getting the moral answers right is pretty central.

So I am beginning to see that we are not so much disagreeing with our super conservative brothers and sisters on the question of marriage, as we are disagreeing with them on the question of who God is. And calling for tolerance on non-essentials is not going to get us any closer.

Where does that leave us then? Divided obviously. But where does it leave us in relation to our own beliefs? How do we examine the truth of our own beliefs? It is no use just accusing others of living in a bubble or an echo chamber where everybody believes the same things and reinforce one another for it, because the truth is that so do most of us. Many of the things that seem self-evident to us look that way because nearly everyone we surround ourselves with and spend time with sees them that way. The more that something is the only thing I hear from among my friends and loved ones, the more self-evident it seems.

If you're hoping I will give you a fail-safe method of determining the truth and knowing you are on the right side, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I can't offer you that.

What I can tell you is what the Apostle Paul was telling us in today's reading from his letter to the Colossians: it is all about Jesus. Whatever you want to know about God and God's intentions for us and the world, start with Jesus.

This is not as obvious as it sounds. I've been in churches where a study series on the nature and character of God would start by working through all the ancient names for God in the earliest parts of the Bible, and explore the meanings and implications of those names. And then by the time they finally get to Jesus, they've already built up an imposing picture and then they proceed to try to get Jesus to conform to the picture.

But in Colossians, Paul tells us that Jesus is the exact image of the invisible God, and that in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Jesus is not one half of a “good cop/bad cop” kind of God. All the fullness of God dwells in Jesus. All. Jesus is the exact image of God, of all of God. So if you have put your trust in Jesus and you want to know about God, don't start with anything like an Old Testament word study of the names of God, start with Jesus. Every time.

Immerse yourself in the stories of Jesus. Ask Jesus to make himself known to you as you prayerfully read the gospel stories of him. Prayerfully imagine yourself into those stories, and see who the Jesus you encounter there is. Listen to others as they share their perceptions and encounters with Jesus. Get out of the echo chamber and make sure you include among your friends and conversation partners some more conservative Christians who see things differently and listen carefully to how they see and hear Jesus. Keep humbly comparing what others say with the Jesus you encounter in the gospels. Be alert for the times when you catch yourself or others reaching for other parts of the Bible that support some long held belief, and

then projecting that onto Jesus. It's not necessarily wrong, but if it seems out of step with the Jesus you encounter in the gospels, it is at least suspect. If it doesn't look like Jesus, walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, then keep questioning it. It may be something Jesus wants to set us free from.

This is especially important when we come to these issues that divide us and threaten to tear apart our churches and associations. There have been lots of them. Marriage equality is just the latest. Try to avoid getting dragged into disputes about what some obscure verse in the ancient Hebrew law means. Keep coming back to Jesus every time. And I don't just mean try to find an answer Jesus gave to the question. Because maybe he didn't. Most of what Jesus says about marriage is that if you are serious about following him, you might be better off not marrying. He never addressed the question of same-sex marriage. But come back to Jesus and prayerfully listen and learn from how he deals with people on other issues, especially issues about which people are fighting and condemning one another. How does Jesus respond in those contexts? Who does Jesus defend? Who would Jesus rather get nailed than sell out and abandon? How does Jesus make the people feel? How can you do likewise?

It's all about Jesus. Every time. And in the end, whether you want to call Jesus your shepherd, your Lord and saviour, your inspiration, or your king, what it all comes down to is Jesus. Jesus, the image of the invisible God. Follow him as your shepherd. Obey him as your king. If it is really him, there is no difference. And if your church is tearing apart at the seams, turn to him again as the one through whom God is reconciling all things. Amen.