

## Sermon Archive 362

Sunday 21 November, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14

John 18: 33-38a

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



My father came to this lovely country in the 1950s, from Northern Ireland. He was pleased to leave behind him a country in trouble. The quaintly described "troubles", in theory, were about who should govern the people. Should it be the Queen? Or some other elected person presiding over a republic? It sounds kind of political theoretical, when you frame it like that – slightly academic. I once dared to suggest to an Irish acquaintance that it was simply an academic matter. His reaction showed me, conversely, that it was far from academic. It was a visceral, deep-nerve provoking matter. It had to do with who knew whom in the street. It had to do with who had educated us and how. Who would kneel next to us as we prayed. Who had the money and who lived the poverty. Who tells the story? Yes, who wears the crown. My daddy escaped a world of deep division cast around a crown. So, I guess, from my early days, I sort of knew that monarchy was just one model for how government should work. But since we came from North of the border (with all our Northern cultural baggage), I guess monarchy was my natural way of thinking about government.

Fast forward to 2009. The burned out minister of St Stephen's Uniting Church in Sydney knows that he needs to get a new job. It's either that, or stay at St Stephen's and die of disappointment. He feels he's a bit young to die, so he starts looking for jobs in other places. A particularly interesting one is something to do with being some kind of "communications person" for the Australian Church in Fiji. A quick analysis of the personal attributes and key performance tasks strikes him as good match to his abilities. He could do good things in this role. Furthermore, he could do the good things while experiencing life in a fresh, new culture. So he fashions the perfect application.

With his perfect application prepared, with his sun-hat well readied for throwing into the ring, his plans were shunted sideways by a constitutional

crisis. It wasn't the Rabuka coup of '87; it wasn't the George Speight coup of the year 2000. It wasn't the Bainimarama coup of 2006. It was the Bainimarama response to the Court of Appeal's declaring the government elected in 2007 to be invalid. The government, having become illegal by a judgment of the court, suspended the constitution that provided the court. In response, various governments, including the Australian one, withdrew their diplomats. Feeling it couldn't send any employee into a diplomatically abandoned zone, the Uniting Church cancelled its communications job. Angry at the door that had been shut in my face, I wondered why Fiji couldn't just be a stable democracy! Is there something wrong with beautiful Fiji, that constant coups keep occurring? Why can't the Queen's most acceptable way just stick!

A deeper analysis, done less in frustration, might have revealed to me that British government is something that British culture simply pasted onto other cultures as it colonized the globe. It was done without any proper critique of what was in place beforehand. It was done without any thought that there might be multiple ways of doing government. If there's a deep thing called "chieftainship" somewhere inside Fijian culture, then who should be surprised when it sometimes pushes back at what's being imposed over its top? Why shouldn't Fiji be able to create some authentically Fijian way of doing a constitution? We Westerners make lots of assumptions about the ubiquitous appropriateness of our governmental ways.

Fast forward to earlier this week. On TVNZ's Tagata Pasifika programme, there was an item about elections in Tonga. The Pacific Ocean's only monarchy, Tonga has a parliament of 26 members. 17 are elected by the public, and the remaining nine are appointed by the crown from a group called the "nobles". The television report included an interview with one of the nobles, a man called "Lord Fakafanua". I wondered what Tongan lords were called before the English language arrived in their islands. Whatever they used to be called, I imagined it would fit better than "Lord". The report also included photos of the royal family. The family, quite progressive in their sharing of power, were presented in Western regalia, with golden crowns, sashes of state, and that white ermine fur around the shoulders with black dots on it. Again, I wondered how Tongan royals would have dressed before British culture arrived. Tonga is politically stable. It's doing well. Its model works. Images and words from the news item again, though, made me think about the pasting of one culture's things onto other things – in ways that don't quite fit. The high-functioning governmental model in Tonga is totally Tongan. It works. It's just unusually named and dressed.

-ooOoo-

Talking about governmental things being dissonantly dressed, not quite fitting, here's the ultimate picture of a form of government we might find difficult to hold.

There's this landscape, with a bit of an "Escher line drawing" vibe to it. Hard to tell really which way is up and whether any one particular line intersects with any other. On the landscape there are a number of thrones. I guess it would be simpler if there were only one, but here there are a number – as if it's allowing for some kind of collaboration. Taking his place on one of the thrones is the Ancient One. Was he ancient enough to have walked with the dinosaurs? To have seen the lost world of our fables and imagination? Is he ancient enough to have seen that naked couple sloping out of the garden with half-bitten apples in their hands? Has he seen Cain protesting his duty to keep his brother? Seen a tower being built with the ambition of touching the sky, but only creating confusion in our speaking? His hair is snowy white! In the time of its whitening, has he heard our every story before, and wisely smiled? God's rule is about the presence of an ancient one – who casts light and shadow, history and truth.

In the weird night-vision picture, God's rule is also about the presence of those who attend the Ancient One. They're the innumerable ones (ten thousand times ten thousand) whom we're told are "opening the books". God's rule is about "opening the books". Does that sound like a reckoning? A calling to account? A speaking of the truth over what may in time have become disputed? Earthly rule might be about spin. It might be about telling the story in a particular way. It might be dismissing what some people would call the "truth" by asking "what is truth anyway". In the weird, not-quite-fitting model of the rule of God, the attendants open the books.

Also in the night vision is one whom we hear is like a human being. How to describe him? Only that he is like a human being. God's rule, full of thrones and clouds and flames and fire, full of whirling wheels and heavenly weirdness that never really will feel it fits, is put into the hands of someone who is like a human being. Rule is expressed through the presence of One who is like us. Do we want a governing that sees us from within? Do we want a monarch who understands what this thing called "human life" is like for us? During the British blitz of 1940, people seemed to respond well to royal figures who joined them in the rubble of their capital city. One who is like a human being . . .

Maybe there are things in Daniel's vision of the heavenly rule that aren't all that weird. Maybe there are deep things expressed about the nature of good rule (experience, wisdom, truth, empathy) – if we just can see past the wheels and fire and other-worldly things that don't quite fit.

Trying, in his own fallible way, to see past things that don't quite fit, is Pontius Pilate. Well acquainted with his own culture's understanding of rule (Empire, authority, taxes and occupation), he's looking at one rumoured to be a king. Like ermine in Tonga, like the Queen in Fiji, like a border in Ireland, this king before him doesn't quite fit. "Are you a king?" he asks. What's your kingdom? How does this work. I'm not sure I get it.

Pontius Pilate, quite famously, is going to struggle with Jesus. As an illustration of true reign, true rule, true governing of the hearts and minds of the people, Jesus doesn't fit. As much as Daniel's flames and wheels don't fit our way of thinking, neither does Jesus fit Pilate's thinking. I wonder if he fits ours really either. If he were to wander into our living with his parables, bearing his cross, breathing his fearful peace which the world cannot give, telling us that we belong to the truth if only we would hear the truth, would we recognise this as the presence of a king?

I suspect, more likely, we would defer to the Queen or our Prime minister. As it is, so he says, "my kingdom is not of this world". Perhaps it's never going perfectly to fit . . .

There remains, however, for the people of God, the day-by-day challenge of working out what it means to be citizens of the kingdom of Christ. What does it mean to belong to the Ancient One in whom all languages, nations and people have a place? What does it mean to know that Christ may be present to us in people who aren't wearing ermine – who might come across to us not as royals, but as prisoners in the dock? It doesn't quite fit.

Hmmm. That sounds like something we might need to hold in our prayers. But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.