

A POST-IMPERIAL ANGLICANISM

1 Samuel 8: 4-20, John 18: 33-37; RCL Proper 29, Year C, 2nd Service.

A sermon preached at St Mark's Parish Church, Newtownards, for the Church of Ireland Men's Society

*John 18: 36 – “... **If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting...**”*

That the kingdoms of this world fight defined history as I learnt it. Like Gilbert's major-general, “I know the kings of England and I quote the fights historical, from Marathon to Waterloo in order categorical.” The great kings of England extended their dominion in France, took over Wales, beat the Scots, held off the Spanish and restrained the French. Never mind the Irish! The failures suffered rebellion or chaos at home, or lost their lands in France. Even as kingship became politically circumscribed through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, history remained primarily military – leading to the empire building of the Nineteenth century and the imperial convulsions of the Twentieth. The history that I learned was imperial history. I doubt it was much different here.

So kingship, as taught in our history, differed little from that portrayed in Samuel's critique of it. Kingship would be military, drafting the sons of a farming community into a fighting force equipped with the technology of the day. Royal power is military power – symbolically so still. And with royal power comes a court to be staffed, fed, serviced and sustained, and political favours to be rewarded with grants of land. So royal power begets taxation, forced labour and expropriation. Royal power, says Samuel, is tyranny. The counter-narrative of English monarchy is the progressive limitation of royal prerogative through Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, parliamentary reform and universal suffrage.

But for all that, theologically, Israel's demand for a king, “like all the nations” represents her rejection of God as her king, and herself as God's people, it is also gain. In contrast to the self-serving caprice of Samuel's sons, it represents a demand for ordered government. In a small, emerging nation surrounded by militarily powerful neighbours, it recognizes the need to organize, and to be able to hold one's head up. After the charismatic rule of the judges, like Samuel, monarchy provides for a stable succession in the royal line. The choice of a king also marks the move from theocracy – always dangerous – to a separation of sovereignty from religious authority. God allows the choice of a king, even as it represents a rejection of him, and in spite of its dangers.

However, circumscribed, however embodied in democratic institutions, this is the understanding of monarchy that we have inherited. We are the heirs of an imperial history, in Church as in state. The Anglican Communion's existence reflects this

history. Imperial expansion took the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer to the Dominions and the colonies of Africa – not forgetting the rebellious colonies of the United States! Anglicanism in these islands expressed the faith of imperial expansion. It is still part of the English establishment. With so many roots in our nineteenth century heyday, ours is, more than we realize, an imperial Christianity. Think of our confident, pre-First World War hymnody – and not just ‘God is working his purpose out’. Even Henry Scott Holland’s ‘Judge Eternal, throned in splendour’ affirmed, in its original wording, the reality of empire, even as it prayed for its cleansing.

“... If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would be fighting...” They would be fighting because this world's power is not easily relinquished. They would be fighting against the rulers of the people Jesus claimed as his – who disowned him and were in revolt against him. They would have been fighting – and dying – to preserve, enforce, extend his power. This world's power is essentially self-serving. That is the thrust of Samuel's six-fold "he will take" in his portrait of Kingship. "He will take your data, and put it to his own use!" In so far as ours is an imperial Christianity, and we, still, the beneficiaries of empire, we have to ask where we might stand in Pilate's headquarters – with him or with Jesus? With the representative of the status quo, of law and order, of empire par excellence, or with him who claimed no power, whose opponents are framing him with sedition? Are we ultimately concerned for our own interests, and for keeping things as they are, or dare we acknowledge a transcendental authority, which, in justice, compassion and mercy desires the good of all people equally? Do we stand with Pilate, who will ultimately crucify to preserve his place in the sun, or with the Son of God, who will give his life so that all may live? For this is the purpose of his kingdom, and this is the truth to which he bears witness.

“...If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would be fighting...” We're mostly past fighting. But if our concern is for ourselves, for self-preservation, we shall not be found faithful servants of his – and we shall die. The corollary of Jesus' giving himself – for us “Where I am, there will my servant be” (*John 12.26*). There is something both rewarding and winning in service to others. That, surely, is the secret of the Mother's Union's life and influence in East Africa, and of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. What would happen if, for example, a branch of the Men's Society got involved with the local ‘Mens Shed’, gave a regular hand at a food bank, or took part in the social ministry of the parish? Men's Society members include some great volunteers! Undertaken with prayer, love and commitment, this is Christian service. It is life giving; and where there is life there will be growth. Best of all, Christ will be honoured in the lives of his servants, and in your witness to the truth.