

MARK 1:14-20
KINGSHIP AND SACRIFICE

New leaders abound in the world this week. We watched the re-election of President Obama in the USA; there was a great fuss made in the world's media in the lead-up to the election; "it's too close to call; who will win?" President Obama and Mitt Romney travelled all across the US trying to persuade people to vote for them so that they can be elected as president. Then after the result was declared, a crestfallen Mitt Romney conceded defeat and there was confetti everywhere as the Democrats celebrated Obama's victory. China has also appointed new leaders this week, with much less fuss and no votes! There is a new President and this is how the BBC News website describes the event: "He has never faced election. We don't know what he thinks about the global economy or global warming. And many Chinese would better recognise his folk-singer wife. Yet Xi Jinping, 59, is about to become China's most powerful man, anointed leader of the ruling Communist Party at a once-a-decade congress." In the last few days, a new Archbishop of Canterbury has been named, as the leader of the Anglican communion across the world and Justin Welby has been appointed.

A lot of this is about power. Power has an intoxicating affect on people; when you don't have it, you want it; when you have some, you want more; when you lose it, it is a devastating loss. So we see the US election that has cost both candidates \$2billion to gain power for four years as President; we see the Chinese establishment appoint its own successors so that the Chinese way will continue, untouched; they speak about new leadership, but the new leadership will continue the ways of the old leadership, holding on to power. Power also corrupts and we see in Syria what happens when someone is desperate to cling onto power and will use any means at his disposal to do that, even bombing his own cities and killing people for whom he is supposed to care! Wars arise from the struggle for power. Church leadership not immune: people examine carefully the new Archbishop's credentials to discover what kind of leader he will be and what kind of leadership he will exercise. The institution of the Church has fallen foul of that kind of power struggle over generations; even in local churches that kind of power struggle goes on.

Jesus uses the language of power. In His very first recorded words in Mark's gospel we hear Him say this: "*The time...*" (Mark 1:15) "Kingdom" is a power-word. For us, it is usually about territory: the United Kingdom can be defined and discovered on a map; this is the territory over which Her Majesty is Queen. In the New Testament it means more than just territory: it also means rule and kingship, someone's reign over other people, almost much more a concept than a piece of ground. Israel had their kings and their history is told in the Old Testament; they were kings over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and David and Solomon were amongst the greatest kings Israel ever had. But there is an abiding theme in the Bible that God is King, that God rules and that is much more about His rule and kingship over His people and their lives and their way of doing things. The people didn't always get it right; they walked away from God's kingship at times to go their own way, but God remained King!

Jesus comes declaring 'the kingdom'. The rule of God has come. We get a sense from some of the Old Testament that people saw God as seated on a throne in heaven, exercising His kingship from that kind of distance; Jesus says 'God's kingship is in the world'. This rule of God is near to the people that Jesus meets, indeed it is staring them

in the face. Someone has suggested that this sense of kingship being in world is intimately connected with Jesus' presence in the world: "(it is) because He is in their midst that it (the kingdom) is in their midst. It is in His words and works and person that the kingdom has come... He *is* the Kingdom" (Cranfield) The long-expected Messiah had come; the King to whom the prophets had been looking forward, is now standing in front of the people. The King has come; the kingship of God is in the world, the promises have been fulfilled.

This is the language of power. Kingship seems to be all about being top, being in power and having power over other people and exercising that power. Kingship is about having a bigger army, more strike-power; having more territory over which to exercise that power. It has always been this way in the world: Roman triumphal processions through the city after military campaigns were designed to show off Roman power over their enemies; Russian military processions through Red Square on Mayday were designed to show the world that "see how many weapons we have!" Is this the language Jesus uses? Has He come to beat His enemies into submission by the exercise of great divine power? Has He come to display His glory for all the world to see? The answer surely is "no"! He did not come in that spirit; He did not come to bring in the kingdom of God by power and glory. There are certain things about His kingship that show us a very different way.

First of all, Jesus came as a servant. "*Even the...*" (Mark 10:45) When I was a student, considering Christian ministry and leadership, I read a very powerful sermon on these words of Jesus, a sermon that over and over again showed just how great is our desire to be served, the instinct that wants to have others serving us and doing what we want; the challenge for Christian leaders is to lead with a very different way of thinking. Why? because that's what Jesus did. He came to be a servant; He came to be the One who washed His disciples' feet; He came to be the One who would meet the needs of weak and vulnerable and frail people, bruised reed kind of people, people who were about to falter and fail. He didn't demand that people dance attention on Him; didn't command their attention by force and even when some told Him that they were leaving, He still sought to serve rather than walk away in the huff. Jesus came as a servant.

What is the symbol of Jesus' kingship? The Crown? The Sword? Neither. The symbol of this kingship is the cross. The gospel's great theme is the cross. Jesus and Him crucified is the centre of the Church's message. It seems weak and foolish, but that is God's way. Jesus came into the world to go the way of the cross and the resurrection tells us that it worked; that God's salvation has been achieved and of course, the resurrection is a place of power, but is nothing without the cross before it. The Church has gone the way of the crown and the sword in the past; the Crusades bear testimony to that and we have to live with that history and repent of it. But Jesus' way is not the crown and the sword; Jesus' kingship is exercised by service, sacrifice and the cross. He reconciled the world to God by the cross; He took away our sins by the cross; He demonstrated the way to live by the cross. Jesus redefines the language of kingship, so that it is no longer the language of power, but now the language of service and sacrifice.

We enter Jesus' kingdom on our knees! "*The kingdom...*" (Mark 1:15) Repentance: there's a word that we don't hear very often! We don't hear it as often as we should even in Christian circles these days. There is a very different attitude about in the world and even in the Christian world: we are encouraged to express ourselves and tell the world how good we are and how gifted and stand on our rights and be self-confident and self-

assured and that kind of “me-centred” culture has infected the Church at times. Jesus loves and cares for people in need and does give us a new sense of confidence, that is true; but it must be balanced with repentance. “*Blessed are...*” (Matthew 5:3) “*The sacrifices...*” (Psalm 51:17) We don’t enter Jesus’ kingdom with pomp, ceremony, boasting and showing off; we enter Jesus’ kingdom on our knees, conscious of what we don’t have; mindful of our faults and failings; aware that we need Jesus as Saviour. That kind of repentance and humble faith should mark out the people of God.

Why does all this matter? Well, when Jesus found the fishermen, what did he say to them? “*Follow me!*” It is a simple command! Christianity, at heart, is not about many of the things that we get worked up about; at heart Christianity is found in these 2 words: “*Follow me!*” Walking in Jesus’ footsteps: that’s the challenge for us; it is a huge challenge, a lifelong challenge, but what a way to live! Walking in Jesus’ footsteps! I admit to being an Indiana Jones’ fan. The third film was all about the search for the Holy Grail legend, the cup from which Jesus drank at the last Supper; according to the film it was found in cave in Jordan guarded by a knight who was 900 years old. In the cave there was a whole range of cups and you have to choose, but choose wisely. The first to choose was the baddie in the film and he chose the cup made of gold and full of gems and precious stones because that would be the cup of the King of Kings; it was the wrong choice! The better choice in the film was a plain, simple cup that reflected the cup of a carpenter from Nazareth. The film perhaps said more than it knew. Our attitude is to be that of Jesus, the humble, in our case repentant, servant.

We are to have an attitude that is cross-shaped – being ready to serve rather than want to be served by others. Our relationships are to be cross-shaped – full of humility and grace, ready to listen, caring for other people. Our ambition are to be cross-shaped, looking to be more like Jesus in the kind of people that we are and looking for opportunities to live out these qualities wherever we go. Our personalities are to be cross-shaped, repentant people, gracious, kind, full of compassion, ready to serve, willing even to sacrifice, for the sake of others. Our attitude to power is to be cross-shaped – ready to serve and influence and care rather than force and demand and coerce people. The Church is to be cross-shaped – being ready to serve our community in ways that people need rather than always expect people to conform to our way of thinking before they can come in. These are the challenges of “*Follow me!*”

So which will it be? The language and attitude of power, looking to be served? Or the language and attitude of service, looking to serve others? Today we remember and marvel at the sacrifice so many people made for sake of peace and freedom in the world, the conflicts caused on so many occasions by the language and attitude of power. Yet, the King and head of the Church came to be served, came to sacrifice Himself, came to go the way of the cross. Our language and attitude should be the same, the language and attitude of service and even sacrifice for the sake of others and the glory of God. Is that too much for you? But that’s what it means to follow Jesus; that’s what it means to enter the kingdom on our knees!