

The BBC reported this week that the *St. Edward's Crown which was made in 1661 has been removed from its normal safe-keeping in the Tower of London and taken to some undisclosed place to be "modified", presumably re-sized in some way, before the coronation of King Charles.

The British monarchy is the closest most of us get to the concept of king which is so important in the language of the Bible. Today's psalm, for example, is all about the king and if you're like me you may have found that a bit difficult. When we think about the Book of Psalms as the hymnal of the second temple, it makes sense that they would include a coronation psalm, but why do we have to use it, and especially in Advent?

All our readings this morning are readings of hope. *John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The reign of heaven has come near. And the stump of Jesse shall grow a shoot.

In the religious imagination of the Hebrew people, King David was a bit like the mythical King Arthur. His dynasty was believed to be the carrier of God's goodness and God's faithfulness in the world. But it had fallen on hard times, wiped out by invading armies. The prophet Isaiah declares that only a stump is left, *the stump of Jesse – David's father. But something new is happening. The Spirit is blowing and "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

The carrier of God's goodness and God's faithfulness has dried up like an old tree stump. It seems that God's goodness and faithfulness have disappeared from the world, but a miracle is occurring and the spirit is bringing forth a shoot, a new monarch, and *"The spirit of the LORD shall rest on them, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD."

With the new monarch comes a whole new way of life, one inspired by the Spirit of God. This new king will not be influenced by bribes or propaganda but will bring righteousness, justice and peace. Sometimes we have difficulty with the word righteousness. We can think of it as **“the orientation of the heart which yearns for the presence of honesty, gentleness, truth and compassion within the human community.”*¹ So this new monarch will yearn for honesty, gentleness, truth and compassion- qualities which are expressed in a social, community context as justice and peace.

Understanding that, there is more sense in singing the psalm. It is not just a coronation psalm for one of David’s descendants but it becomes a song of hope that a new monarch is coming, that the reign of heaven is near. And in the days of the new and coming king there will be *justice for everyone, not just good things for the rich. This is the hope of the reign of God – that there will be a society based on honesty, gentleness, truth, compassion, justice and peace.

And in the wilderness John the Baptizer proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The reign of God - which we can scarcely imagine when we look at the corruption, anger and craziness in the social and political world around us – that amazing time and place of God’s reign has come near.

Back to the first reading, where Isaiah is so inspired and excited by this new thing which he glimpses God is doing that he expands the reign of God *to include wolves and calves and lions and lambs. When the reign of God is manifest among humanity it will affect all beings because we will be taking our proper place in our environment and all beings, plants and critters will also flourish.

This is a big vision, a big hope.

¹ Brueggemann et al, Texts for Preaching Year A, 1995 Westminster John Knox, P.14

But wait, wait, there's more.

Paul in his letter to the Romans says, **“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*

It's not just the wolves and calves and lions and lambs. *Romans is all about racism and racial harmony, all about Jews and Gentiles managing to live together in equality and mutual respect. So in the coming reign of God there are no outcast or stateless people, no systemic racism, no-one drowning as they try to migrate, no-one in fear for their lives, no transphobia, no hatred.

But notice, Paul does not expect this astonishing state of justice and peace to come fully formed from heaven. No, he expects us to do something about it, to actively live in harmony with one another, to welcome one another, and for why? So that we may glorify God.

There is a possible distortion of Advent that we need to consider. The distortion is that the free gift of *Emmanuel – of God becoming human and dwelling among us, makes us passive. We may wake up, we may be full of hope and joyful expectancy but then we expect the Spirit to blow over our stumps and bring the new shoots without our active engagement. It is like getting a present but failing to open it.

The reign of God is not a passive thing which is going to happen to us while we are busy making other plans. *John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” And he got pretty irritated with the folk who came down from Jerusalem to see this fascinating new preacher in the funny clothes. Just because you are descended from Abraham doesn't mean that you can just sit back, go through the motions and

expect the stirring of the Spirit to bring a new monarch who will solve all your problems.

What might he say today? Just because you show up at church, just because you are Episcopalian, just because you try to be nice people, doesn't mean that you can expect the stirring of the Spirit to be nice. You still need to be actively involved. *Repent!

Repentance means to change your heart and mind. Repentance means to start living as if the gospel is true and the reign of God has come near. Repentance means to let go of our attachment to the old stump and welcome what the Spirit is doing, to welcome what the new may be.

I am grateful to Deacon Jen and the Discovery Team who are working to hear what new things the Spirit is doing in our midst. *I am grateful that they are offering pop-up coffee and prayer during Advent, and went ahead yesterday even in the rain and cold. I am grateful that Pamela Bleisch has encouraged us to get into the Christmas Parade for the first time in many years and that Alan will be our Santa Claus.

*We don't know what the new church will look like. We know it will be different and that is uncomfortable. But we know that the new will be more of God's faithfulness and God's goodness. Because those never fail.

*And so we rejoice with the prophets and the psalmist, with the apostle Paul and even with John the Baptizer that God is doing a new thing in our midst, and the reign of God is come near.