

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL: 2nd SUNDAY before ADVENT 2018 – MATTINS

I wonder how often the prayer 'thy kingdom come' is offered in this cathedral – regularly in the daily round of services, hourly by the duty chaplains and no doubt countless times by individuals as they pause to pray in this place. But what is this kingdom for which we long?

This morning's lessons were concerned with kingship. We heard how Samuel, against it seems his own better judgement, anointed Saul and then had him chosen by lot. Samuel was under pressure. The nation was being harassed by the Philistines. In such circumstances it is not surprising that the lot fell upon a man who was a head taller than the rest. They wanted a military leader who would lead them to victory in battle. Given his hesitation about what this development did for God's rule to whom Israel had looked for its well-being, Samuel produced regulations as to how a king should exercise his authority – sadly a task in which Saul ultimately failed. The process of choice may be different and the exercise of monarchy quite other in a democracy like ours but the idea of leadership which, by one means or another will stand up for the nation remains significant across the world to this day. It is often a factor as to how people exercise their vote in a General Election, in presidential elections in the USA and surely in the present Brexit debate.

Jesus' disciples would have had a similar understanding of the role of a king when He began to speak about the kingdom of God or as St. Matthew prefers the kingdom of heaven. Such was the contemporary understanding of the role of the promised Messiah whose immediate arrival John the Baptist had proclaimed. As we heard in our second lesson Jesus often chose a parable to describe the kingdom of heaven. He took incidents from daily life – in this case the growth of the mustard seed and the making of bread – to offer insight into the ways of God and of his sovereignty over his people. A parable does not direct, rather it gives food for thought. The story challenges us to think more deeply about life and its meaning. In a world which lacked our scientific knowledge, the germination and growth of the seed would be seen as nothing to do with human skill but the work of the Creator. Jesus is inferring that from very small beginnings like the seed in the ground the yeast in the dough, God's kingdom will grow, spreading in a way which may be hidden to many but seen for what it is by some.

The kingdom of God implies the rule of God over creation and not least humanity. For that we pray. Yet we know that in a unique way that kingdom was present in the life and ministry of Jesus. The signs were there, not least in His battle with sickness, hypocrisy and evil. There is the small beginning of the renewal of God's purpose to which those present were invited to respond and to find new life by recognising God's reign, seeking to live as He wills. A few got the message and responded. In this way often quietly the kingdom has grown across the world as men and women of every race in heart and mind have experienced and acknowledged God's sovereignty as revealed in Jesus Christ.

For Christians the kingdom of God is not utopia or social order but the assurance that as we try to play our part in battling with evil God reigns. As Jesus clearly showed His kingdom is present not when power seeks to dominate others but when sacrifice, humility, forgiveness, the recognition that all belong to God, when hope and vision are found in our lives. Through divine initiative the kingdom of God was set before us in Jesus. We who, as it were, are living between the times, are invited to be part of that kingdom now, as we look forward to the last day when all things are gathered up in Christ. When the battle with evil is over, God's kingdom is complete. As we pray for that moment, we need with God's help, to look for the signs of that kingdom now as lives are transformed for good and as we earnestly continue to pray 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Amen

+Alan Chesters