

Food for Thought: “Is Monarchy God’s Idea, A Good Idea or a Bad One?”

Introduction:

The answer to this question will depend on how we approach the subject and how we qualify the question. We might ask, what kind of monarchy is it? , who is the monarch? , how did the King/Queen get power? Furthermore, how do they exercise power, keep power, or indeed have any power? To whom are they accountable and do we believe that an unelected monarchy can be part of a modern democracy?

In this article, I would like to begin by looking at the subject of Kingship in the Old Testament and some of the lessons we can learn from what is written there, before moving on to consider the state of the British monarchy as we briefly cover some of its history as well as its present condition.

Finally, I will look at some of the New Testament teaching on ‘King and Kingdom’ where we see its ongoing relevance in terms of Jesus as King and the setting up of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Some Background & Lessons from the Old Testament with regard to Monarchy.

Although surrounding nations already had kings, Samuel was the first king-maker of Israel. Before then they had a Theocracy, that is, direct rule by God through men (and some women) called by God to be leaders and judges of the people e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Elon, Samson etc.

But the people wanted to have a king like the surrounding nations, principally someone visible who could lead them in battle. Samuel was not happy with their request and God himself even less happy. God saw it as a rejection of him as king because of their idolatry.

God then warned them what the king would do: he would take and take and take from them, and become oppressive. Nevertheless, the people insisted on having a king. (See 1 Sam. 8:4-22)

Saul, Israel’s first king, was chosen by the Lord, anointed by Samuel, and confirmed by the people (1 Sam. 10:1; 11:12-15). Saul was an impressive young man, tall and good-looking, and he started well, being transformed by the Holy Spirit. However, as with many who acquire power, it went to his head.

He gradually began to disobey and reject the word of the Lord, he feared his subjects, he became paranoid with respect to David, he built a monument to himself, consulted a witch, and eventually committed suicide on the battle field. It grieved the Lord that he had made Saul king over Israel (1 Sam.15:10-35).

This surely warns us that monarchy can go disastrously wrong. It depends on the character and conduct of the monarch.

The French revolution came about as a result of the corruption of the last three of the Bourbon Kings, Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI. Corruption is defined as: - "The abuse of entrusted power for personal gain." These three Kings were obsessed with self-indulgent luxury, extravagant spending and aggressive foreign policy which left the country on the brink of bankruptcy.

Saul's replacement was David, another complex character but someone who did much better than Saul. He was a long way from perfect, but one of the key things about him was that when he sinned, he always repented and was restored. Overall, God was pleased with him, so much so that God promised him: -

"I will make one of your sons King and will keep his kingdom strong..... I will make sure his dynasty continues for ever..... You will always have descendants and I will make your kingdom last for ever. Your dynasty will never end." (See 2 Sam. 7:12-29)

This promise was then fulfilled initially by David's son Solomon who had been conceived through David's illicitly begun relationship with Bathsheba. This shows us that every Royal Family (indeed every family), has skeletons somewhere in its cupboards i.e., things best not spoken about. Even the gospel writer Matthew cannot quite bring himself to mention Bathsheba by name but refers to her, in the genealogy of Christ, as 'the woman who had been Uriah's wife' (Mt. 1:6)!

In some ways, Solomon's reign was the high-water mark of Israel in the Old Testament. He built the Temple, there was peace in his time, he asked God for wisdom and discernment in governing the people and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. This pleased God, and so God blessed him in this way as well as making him rich materially and famous internationally.



So, Solomon became quite a celebrity, with all the attendant dangers! He was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with him to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart (1 Kings 10:23&24).

He did however, go 'off-piste,' marrying many foreign women, having lots of concubines (half-wives), imposing a heavy yoke on his people, and introducing the worship of the 'detestable gods' of the Sidonians, the Moabites and the Ammonites. In his heart he 'turned away from the Lord.' The result was that his kingdom was torn in two.

Rehoboam his son succeeded him as King but he made a fatal error ~ he listened to the wrong people! Instead of following the advice of his Elders, who had worked with his father and advised him to lighten the load on the people, he listened instead to those young men around him who were his friends and contemporaries who said he should make the load even heavier!

This shows us that monarchy is never just about the monarch as an individual but is also very much about those with whom they surround themselves!

Meanwhile, Rehoboam had a rival, Jeroboam I. He had been one of Solomon's servants but had fallen out with him and now he wanted a piece of the action. Knowing how the people were disgruntled with Rehoboam, Jeroboam I encouraged them to rebel and then the people called for him to become king of Israel in the northern part of the territory.

Once crowned, he did not want the people going south to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple in case he 'lost' them to Rehoboam. So, he made two golden calves and set them up, one in Bethel, and the other in Dan and said, 'Worship these instead.' This shows us the dangers of expediency that undermines true worship.

God was so displeased with what Jeroboam I did ('eviller than those who lived before him'), that God brought a complete end to the family and house of Jeroboam I. They ceased to exist. "This was the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall and to its destruction from the face of the earth." (1 Ki. 13:34)

Once the nation had split after Solomon's reign, with ten tribes forming the northern kingdom of Israel and two tribes the southern kingdom of Judah, Israel went on to have a succession of 19 Kings and Judah had 19 Kings plus one Queen.

But, amid all this chaos, we see God's sovereignty ~ preserving the tribe of Judah and preserving the Davidic dynasty through whom, eventually, Christ the King would emerge. Whatever the 'turn of events,' they are ultimately 'from the Lord' (1 Ki. 12:15). All events only serve to advance God's ultimate plan and purpose.

What Do We Make of the British Monarchy?



The first English Coronation was held at Bath Abbey where St. Dunstan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, crowned King Edgar. He ruled from 959-975 A.D. and his coronation ceremony took place in 973 A.D.

However, Edward the Confessor had Westminster Abbey built specifically for coronations and 40 English and British monarchs have now been crowned there. The first one was William the Conqueror on Christmas Day 1066 and King Charles III and Queen Camilla the most recent on 6th May 2023.

Warriors

The majority of British Kings and their forces have had to fight in order to establish and hold on to power. Richard III was the last English King to die in battle, at Bosworth Field in 1485. He was killed by the forces of the Lancastrian contender for the crown, Henry Tudor, later to become Henry VII.

King George II, aged 60, was the last British sovereign to fight alongside his soldiers at the Battle of Dettingen in Germany against France in 1743.

Divinely ordained

British Kings and Queens have always been regarded as being Divinely ordained and, in a sense, representatives of Christ on earth.

For example, Richard II in the Wilton Diptych of 1396, is seen being presented to Mary and the Christ-child by three Saints: John the Baptist holding a Lamb, Edward the Confessor holding a ring, and St. Edmund holding an arrow.

Right at the beginning of the recent Coronation of Charles III, he is welcomed by a young chorister who says, “Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings.” And the King replies, “In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve.”

The human and the Divine aspects combine.

Restricted power

British monarchs have rarely had absolute power but have always been increasingly subject to the development of parliament since the 13/14th centuries, subject to the people, subject to the laws of the land, and, since 1689, subject to the laws of the Church of England.

Edward II in 1307 promised to rule ‘according to the laws which shall be chosen by the community of your realm’.

Being a British monarch is conditional on the swearing of Oaths. The monarch must swear to govern the people ‘according to their respective laws and customs.’ They must also swear to cause ‘Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed’, and to ‘maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel’.

Since the Coronation Oath Act of 1689, the monarch has also to ‘maintain the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law’ and ‘maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof.’

Only a faithful Protestant may ascend to the British throne.

What About the British Monarchy in the 21st Century?

As we have just experienced the first Coronation of the 21st century, (there were 5 in the 20th century), it seems to me that with our ‘constitutional monarchy’ we continue to have a monarch who reigns but does not rule. Their power, as we have seen, is curtailed, controlled. All the trappings of Royal power (pomp, ceremony, military parades etc.) are present, but in fact power lies entirely with Parliament and the Government of the day.

Parliament is also sovereign over Government as the Conservatives discovered when they tried, unsuccessfully, to prorogue/suspend Parliament between 25 September and 14 October 2019.

The monarch does not hold the Government to account, rather the Prime Minister controls the monarch on behalf of Parliament. This at least may be the appearance though the reality is probably more subtle. Maybe the monarch does influence the Prime Minister in their weekly meetings in some ways?!

Survival

Some people today wonder if monarchy, being hereditary rather than democratic, can survive. Though still popular with the older generation, the younger generation are less interested in and less committed to our monarchy, according to recent research.

Two things that any monarchical system must do if it is to continue, is firstly, keep close to the people over whom they reign, and secondly, keep preparing the way for the next monarch(s) to be ushered in.

With respect to the first condition, royalty must be seen to be 'just like us' so, a few months ago, Charles and Camilla visited the set of 'EastEnders,' the new Prince of Wales was out selling copies of 'The Big Issue' on behalf of the unemployed, and recently he and his wife were behind a bar pulling pints! All this enables them to identify with ordinary people.

This is key to their survival.

However, the thing that distinguishes them from 'commoners' is luxury and lifestyle. The shoes that King Charles wore at his coronation alone cost £3,500. The Coronation itself cost around £250 million (including security). The crowns, orb, sceptre used in the Service are valued at about £1.3 billion and the King himself could be worth up to £1.7 billion. Meanwhile, in other parts of London, people queued waiting for Food Banks to open.

In terms of continuity and succession of the monarchy, we must pay careful attention to the words of the Prince of Wales spoken at the Celebration Concert in the grounds of Windsor Castle the day after King Charles' Coronation.

In precisely chosen words, he invoked past, present, and future, knowing that his grandmother (the departed Queen Elizabeth II) is 'up there, fondly keeping an eye on us,' his father (Pa) has served the people for 50 years and continues to serve them, and the new Prince of Wales, King William V in waiting, committed himself 'to serve you all, King, country and commonwealth.'

Positives

It also seems to me that there can be some positives associated with monarchy. It provides opportunities for the nation to come together in shared celebration at times of coronation, marriage, anniversaries etc, and to experience shared grief in times of national loss and mourning. These national occasions, crossing boundaries of race, religion, generations etc. can cement us together and remind us of our common humanity.

Also, even though we now live in a post-Christian Britain, the Christian-based Services, packed with Biblical truth and worship, are still a powerful reminder of our heritage and the availability of God for us today. God continues to speak.

Another powerful witness was the inclusivity and diversity demonstrated over the Coronation weekend. Spiritually, if Britain is to return to the Lord, it will, I believe, be through the vibrant faith of our black and ethnic minority brothers and sisters in Christ that this is most likely to occur. They are showing us the way back to God.

And, of course, we have been blessed that our longest serving monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, was an active and professing Christian woman and that her son, the new King, has promised allegiance to Christ.

Even though our monarchs today reign rather than rule, I also think that God has invested a certain power in the monarchy and that this provides a counter-balance to political power. The more that power is shared around the less likely it is that it can be abused. Perhaps our monarchy contributes to us not having had a dictatorship and gives us a measure of stability and continuity in the affairs of State?

But even though human monarchs come and go and human kingdoms wax and wane, nevertheless it seems to me that God has invested so much of his past and present revelation, and future anticipation, in terms of monarchy, reign, rule, kingship and kingdom, that it remains central to our Biblical/Christian theology. Whatever we may think of monarchy as a human institution, God has invested himself in it and therefore it continues to be relevant.

If you look in a Bible concordance, you will be amazed at the number of times the words 'King' and 'Kingdom' occur. The whole Bible is steeped in 'Royal' language and practices. The danger surely is that we dismiss monarchy as being

purely anachronistic. Could it be that God is continuing to remind us of the significance of monarchy today. Maybe He is holding up a mirror for us.

Sean Coughlan (BBC News App – 7/5/23) beautifully captured the drama of King Charles' Coronation: "At close quarters in the Abbey, the orchestra and choir were remarkable, the music welling up like a tidal wave of sound. It was bouncing off the stained- glass windows.... Handel's Zadok the Priest, full of drama and anticipation, was a real spine-tingler.... It is impossible to go into Westminster Abbey without feeling the weight of history on every side. It seeps from every plaque and statue."

And we read in 1 Kings 1:39&40: "Zadok the Priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound."

King and Kingdom Theology

There is no doubt that in the Old Testament God himself accepts the role of being the 'King of Israel.' And not only the 'King of Israel,' but also 'King over all the earth.' And not only a temporary King but 'King for ever and ever.' And not just an insignificant King but the 'King of Glory.' (See Ps. 10:16; 47:2, 98:6; Zech. 14:9; Zeph. 3:15b; Is. 33:22)

One of the highlights for me at Carlisle Grammar School was the annual pilgrimage to the Cathedral for the Ascension Day Service. Although I had no personal relationship with God at that time, I sensed that something special was happening. The Organ thundered and the sung words of Psalm 24 reverberated around the building: "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

So, the Old Testament prepares the way for the arrival of the Davidic, Messianic King Jesus.

There is a very important, but rarely noticed, prophetic utterance from Jacob concerning his son Judah in Genesis 49:10. Jacob compares Judah to a lion and we then read, ***"The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."*** Jesus was, and is, the ultimate fulfilment of this prophetic word. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5). Every monarch there has ever

been, or will be, is therefore holding a temporary sceptre and staff, and is wearing a borrowed crown.

This prophetic word is repeated in Ezekiel 21:25-27 where the profane and wicked King of Israel is told to 'remove the crown'. And Ezekiel says, "It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs."

As we move into the New Testament, Matthew traces Jesus' Kingly ancestry in the first chapter of his gospel and in chapter 2 introduces Jesus as 'King of the Jews,' putting this correct title in the mouth of the paranoid king Herod (verse2).

None of us should doubt that Jesus came into the world as a King. Pilate said to Jesus, "You are a king then," and Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." "But my kingdom is not of this world." (See Jn. 18:33-37).

Jesus' kingdom in the here and now is essentially a spiritual kingdom, not a political or territorial one. Only when Jesus returns will 'the kingdom of the world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (Rev. 11:15).

The New Testament holds together God as 'the blessed and only Ruler, the KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS' (1Tim. 6:15), and Jesus with the same title: "On his robe and on his thigh, he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." (Rev. 19:16)



So, Jesus was a king at his first coming (though largely unrecognised), and will be a king (manifest to all) at his second coming. However, at his second coming he comes to both rule and reign. Both his rule and his reign will be absolute and will be shared with those who belong to him.

Psalm 2 and Revelation 2:27, 12:5 and 19:15 tie this together.

In its immediate context, psalm 2, written by David, speaks of the coronation of his son, Solomon, and the danger people are in who set themselves against his rule. The psalm also applies to the coming rule of Jesus, the Anointed One/ Messiah/King.

In the book of Revelation, psalm 2 verse 9 is mentioned three times and is applied once to us and twice to Jesus.

The application to us is for those who overcome/ persevere/ endure with Jesus. They will be given authority over the nations and they will 'rule them with an iron sceptre; [they] will dash them to pieces like pottery' (Rev. 2:27).

The two applications to Jesus are In Rev. 12:5 and 19:15. In Revelation 12:5, the woman, Mary, gives birth to a male child, Jesus, 'who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre', and in 19:15 we read that 'Out of his [Jesus] mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre."'

Because we live in an age of relativism, we may find this language not to our liking. However, we must remember that with God there are absolute values which flow from his nature and character.

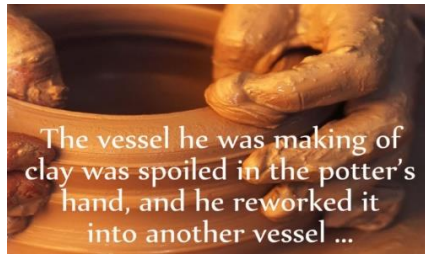
We may also miss the full force of these words because we think the language is purely symbolic/metaphorical. But these metaphors tell us something about the nature and character of Jesus; they add meaning to who he is and how he operates. They are not just flowery language!

Two of the pictures here are of a shepherd and a potter. In the three times where psalm 2:9 is quoted in Revelation, each time the verb is 'to shepherd' rather than 'to rule'. Maybe this has a gentler feel to it, more in-keeping with Jesus as the 'good shepherd', though the iron staff/sceptre indicates total authority.

The picture of the potter 'dashing to pieces' his pot (the nations) is perhaps more troubling. I think we need to turn back to Jeremiah and what God said to him and through him at the potter's house in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is certainly a type of Christ and both of their ministries were 'to build and to plant' (constructive), and to uproot, tear down, destroy and overthrow nations by their words (destructive). See Jer. 1:9&10 and Rev. 19:15.

Jeremiah 18: 1-12 teaches us that if any nation or kingdom, or in this case specifically the house of Israel, repents of and reforms its evil ways, then God can reform/reshape the spoiled pot in his hands and disaster is averted.



However, Jeremiah 19:1-15 is a much more disturbing scenario. Jeremiah is told to go and buy a clay jar from a potter and, in the presence of the Kings of Judah and the people of Jerusalem, to smash the clay jar in pieces and say, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired.' (Verse 11)



Even in my lifetime I have seen many atheistic, totalitarian nations where the state, and those who lead it, have become objects of worship: Albania, Russia, China, Cuba, Cambodia, North Korea etc.



Meanwhile, in these nations, God continues to raise up 'Jeremiahs' who offer both hope and warning, often at great cost to themselves. And, we wait for that great invitation from our King Jesus: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Mt. 25:34).

So, 'since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.' (Heb. 12:28&29)

George Irving – June 2023