

24 November 2019

Jeremiah 23.1-6

Luke 23.33-43

Ruling as God rules

Our TV screens and newspapers are full of images and stories of governments and rulers under pressure and under scrutiny.

Peaceful protests and riots on the streets of Hong Kong

Protesters on the streets of Iran shot by police after protesting against the tripling of oil and petrol prices

In recent weeks there has been unrest in places like Chile, Bolivia and Lebanon

In the US we have witnessed the new revelations in the impeachment enquiry into Donald Trump

In the UK we have seen our royal family under the spotlight again with the televised interview with Prince Andrew last Sunday evening, and Prince Andrew's subsequent withdrawal from public duties.

And, of course, we are in the middle of an election campaign when all of our politicians are under intense scrutiny.

We might think that holding rulers to account is a relatively modern phenomenon - the result of the rise of liberal democracy. But in different ways it has been happening throughout history. In particular it is deeply embedded in the prophetic traditions of ancient Israel.

The prophets believed that everybody, but everybody, was subject to the rule of God ... even the king. The king might reign, but even the king was subject to and answerable to the rule and the reign of God.

And so in the passage we read from Jeremiah 23 we hear Jeremiah holding all of

the ruling classes of Jerusalem to account. The standard he sets before them is the standard of the shepherd caring for the sheep.

This is a model of responsibility and care that comes from the imagery of worship. 'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.'

If this is how God cares for the people then this is how God's rulers should govern in his name. Offering provision and protection as God offers provision and protection.

The baseline standards are expressed in the promise given by Jeremiah when shepherds are in place who model their rule on God's ways of ruling his people. Jer 23.4:

'I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, and no one will be missing.'

Things have gone wrong when rulers rely on the power of fear to govern, and when individuals and sections of society are excluded.

We see this most clearly in all authoritarian regimes of both left and right. The compliance of the people is assured through the rule of fear. And those who oppose the government, or don't fit in with their ideology are suppressed, silenced, disappeared, imprisoned or executed.

But it happens in far less extreme ways as well, when forceful, single-minded people govern in an atmosphere that does not allow others to challenge them, that bullies and undermines, and that is based on excluding those who don't fit the system.

Living where no one will be afraid, and no one will go missing – is a vision for all communities to aspire to ... and for the leaders of all communities to work towards.

The rulers of Israel were called to a different standard. They were called to rule as God rules.

The rulers of ancient Israel could get this wrong in two ways.

They could decide to model the way they ruled not on the way God rules but on the way all the other rulers around them ruled. And so use all of the power games that rulers used to suppress their people and sustain their powerbase.

Or they could simply get God wrong. You see, if you have the impression that God is a distant and threatening presence, then you will model your reign on that impression.

The guiding principle for the prophets who held the rulers to account was that the rulers should rule as God rules.

They believed passionately that God's rule was a rule that embodied justice for all. A rule that looked out for those on the margins - the widows, the orphans and the aliens. A rule where none would live in fear, and where all would find their place.

So here is the challenge for those in power that echoes down the centuries to us from the Jeremiah 23.

If you are going to dare to rule, then rule as God rules this world. And when God rules this world, this is what it looks like

- no one will be in fear
- no one will be missing – no one will be excluded, everyone will find their place

And Jeremiah sets the scene for a coming ruler whom God will send, who will do just this. He will rule with the justice and righteousness of God.

And Christians dare to believe that this hope has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

Here, we dare to say, is the very embodiment of someone who rules as God rules ...

But the problem is, he just doesn't seem to fit that mould at all.

He doesn't look like a ruler as we know it. And actually the end of his life is the very opposite of what a strong, inspirational leader and ruler should be. He ends his life as a mocked and ridiculed ruler.

The 'real' rulers, Luke tells us, sneered at him.

The soldiers mocked him, '*If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.*'

His way of being king was highly questionable.

He dies with a sign above his head that reads 'This is the King of the Jews'.

And the sub-text might read ... "And this is what we do to imposter kings."

The form of death that he dies – crucifixion – it is a form of death that is particularly reserved for those who dare to rebel against Rome.

Remember how I was saying earlier how authoritarian governments work:

- they engender fear
- they make sure that those who don't fit in go missing

Well crucifixion was one of the means that Rome used to carry out this policy

- it was their way of executing the rebels ... making sure that they go missing for good
- and as a public spectacle it was their way of spreading fear – trying to ensure that no one else dare threaten Roman rule.

And Jesus finds himself as victim of this.

He is

- a ridiculed king
- a rejected king
- a rebel king.

And yet we Christians dare to claim that in him we see God's rule exercised as in no one else.

He models for us what it means truly to live under God's rule.

He models for us what it means to rule as God rules in this world.

He does that by staying true to his vision of God to the end. He had dared to speak of God's kingdom, of God's rule as being a rule which reaches out in mercy and forgiveness to the outsider ...

It was this that had brought suspicion on him in the first place – he was just too free and easy with God's generosity and grace.

And even on the cross he stays true to that vision of God and his kingdom:

He prays 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

The kingdom that was open to the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the kingdom that embraced the lepers, was now also opened to those who crucified him.

The penitent criminal, of all people, understood what Jesus' kingdom was all about: 'Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus says, 'Today, you will be with me in paradise.'

In this kingdom, in this rule of God, no one need be missing.

But putting this kind of radical, inclusive rule into practice is costly work.

So what is the implication of this for what it means to rule as God rules?

Well, for those who find themselves in places of power and influence the challenge is all the greater.

From a faith perspective we have to say that the call of God on their lives is still for them to rule as God rules in this world.

But if God's rule is epitomised by the living and dying of Jesus, then those called to this kind of public leadership are called to model the way in which they rule,

not on the life of an ideal or idealised ruler, but on the life of one who ended up disempowered and hanging in the place of a rebel.

And as the prophetic people of God, this is the challenge and expectation that we should place on those who are called to govern and rule.

But what this story also does is to redefine where God's seat of power is exercised in the world.

Israel's longing for a Messiah was a longing for another king – an extraordinary king, an ideal king ... but a king nonetheless whose seat of power would be on a throne, in a palace ...

And God sends Jesus ... who is expelled from and rejected by the seats of power. Whose only crown is a crown of thorns, and who is enthroned on a cross.

But this is the place where God's reign of love is unleashed on the world. This is the place where God's transformative power is centred.

This is the place, this is the method that God chooses to rule and to reign in the world. In and through the open arms of suffering love.

So to look for where, and in whom God might be ruling and reigning in this world, we would be wise not just to look to the seats of government and power, but we might turn to look to people and places

- where voices of hope are ridiculed and rejected;
- in the voices of those who speak truth to power, but are being ignored or silenced;
- in the victims of injustice whose lives are counted as expendable;

These are the people that Jesus identifies with as he hangs on the cross

These are the people in whom and through whom God's reign of love continues to be exercised in our world.

And the call and claim on each one of us is to allow God to reign in us and through us as God rules and reigns on the cross in Jesus.

And wherever we exercise power and influence over others (as we all do at times), we are called to lead as God leads in Jesus, to rule as God rules in Jesus, to exercise power as God exercises power in Jesus.