

CEDAR

Reading Ezekiel 31.1-14

In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes:

Whom are you like in your greatness? Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds. The waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow around the place where it was planted, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field. So it towered high above all the trees of the field; its boughs grew large and its branches long, from abundant water in its shoots. All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth to their young; and in its shade all great nations lived. It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant water. The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; the plane trees were as nothing compared with its branches; no tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty. I made it beautiful with its mass of branches, the envy of all the trees of Eden that were in the garden of God.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I gave it into the hand of the prince of the nations; he has dealt with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Foreigners from the most terrible of the nations have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs lie broken in all the watercourses of the land; and all the peoples of the earth went away from its shade and left it.

On its fallen trunk settle all the birds of the air, and among its boughs lodge all the wild animals.

All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to lofty height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For all of them are handed over to death, to the world below; along with all mortals, with those who go down to the Pit.

Talk

Ezekiel was writing at a time when Egypt was encroaching on the land of Israel, particularly along the Mediterranean seaboard – what today we hauntingly call the Gaza strip. He uses this extended metaphor of the cedar tree to warn Pharaoh that political and military power is not the whole story. He talks about the Assyrian Empire as a great cedar - one so big it seemed to fill the world. And indeed that is a fair analogy when you look to its glory days. He is using an image which we know was used in Babylonian and Sumerian thinking - a Cosmic Tree which joined heaven and earth, and with roots down to the cosmic waters under the earth. But the very power of the tree, its pride, is the source of its downfall. God hands over this great tree to Babylonia, and now it lies broken and wasted. The greatness of the fall is matched only by the shock people have had in seeing what happened to it.

When Jesus is on trial, he is accused of claiming to be King of the Jews. And it would seem that his execution was basically on that threat of political power. It was a nonsense of course, because Jesus never claimed any political power, and talked of his kingdom not being of this world. Nonetheless the wording Pilate put on the cross was ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’ – and that in its initial letter form INRI is part of the decoration of millions of churches today. By this time in history we should be conscious that even the greatest powers do not last forever. Not only is Assyria fallen but so are Babylon, and the Roman Empire, and the Communist Empire, and every other Empire there has ever been in the past. They come and go, sometimes very much to everyone’s surprise. But the kingdom of God stands for ever, and Pilate underestimated Jesus (to use George Bush’s famous word). He was not the King of the Jews, but the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Perhaps we don’t talk so often these days about God deposing nations – although Fred Pratt Green began a hymn not so long ago with the words ‘It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand.’ But we do talk about the Kingdom of God being infinitely more important than any other. Being citizens of heaven is more significant than being citizens of the United Kingdom. ‘This world is not my home – I’m just a-passin’ through’ as the spiritual put it. So today we have a King enthroned on a Cross, ruling from a gallows, because not even the might of Roman power in the 1st century could defeat him. Ezekiel’s warning to Egypt is like a re-statement of the story of the Tower of Babel – man’s pride thought it could reach up to heaven, and that was never to be. As we sang in the hymn just now:

Human pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust
What with care and toil he buildeth, tow’r and temple fall to dust
But God’s power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tow’r.

Keeping clear in our minds the kingship of Jesus, the centrality of the kingdom of God is a way of keeping check on whatever other bids for power there might be. So for Christians a powerful question we need to put to any political group seeking our vote in an election is how much their policies reflect the policies of the kingdom of God. A government will rule for a short time, but Christ rules for ever.