

“When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

John 6. 15

Why does he do this? The people of Israel had the books of Kings, and Chronicles, to warn them that power held by humans often corrupts. But, having been overwhelmed by Assyrians, Greeks and Romans they idealised the time when God was clearly in charge in the form of an earthly king, and set their ultimate hope on the King who would be the new David, who would restore Israel, the new Moses, who would lead them out of oppression and into a new promised land.

What did Moses do in the wilderness? Fed them, miraculously, with manna. What does Jesus do? Feeds them in the wilderness, miraculously. No wonder they wanted to say he was the new Moses, the new King. The weight of expectation was huge, but Jesus has a different kingship to offer...not a tribal King in a world of leaders and agreements. Not a miracle worker who would establish a new territorial nation. But a supreme King, whose reign would transform the world. The King they want – the all ruling, all powerful, world conquering leader, is not the one Jesus offers. But the temptation must have been huge. So he escapes.

The writings we call apocalyptic were a feature of the life and worship of the people of Israel under occupation. The stories told of the time when the people were in exile in Babylon, centuries before, had a resonance when the Jews tried to work out who to obey, how to be distinctive, how to worship, when the rules of the oppressors made them compromise their faith. Daniel rises to a position of great power and influence in a kingdom where the King worships another God, and tries to blot out the faith which Daniel and his friends profess. The stories of miraculous deliverance – from the furnace and the lions, must have given heart to Jews being forced to worship the emperor, and not God.

A remarkable feature of the book of Daniel is the way not only does he never compromise the heart of his faith, but that he boldly speaks truth to power. He does it to Nebuchadnezzar, and now to his son Belshazzar. Earthly power, corrupted, will bring you down. Daniel knows what it is to be a king, and is unafraid to read the writing on the wall to tell it like it is to a man who could destroy him with a word. If you've seen *Spectre* you'll have heard these words:

For you I have to risk it all, cause the writing's on the wall.

Sam Smith: 'Spectre'

But far from being a challenge to give all to a lover (which is what I think Sam Smith is singing about), the writing on the wall is about exercising power with justice and with selflessness.

Daniel says this to Belshazzar:

'You, Belshazzar...have not humbled your heart...You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven...the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honoured'

(Daniel 5)

Where will we find Kingship? Not in great displays of wealth, nor in the corruption which takes holy things from the Temple and makes them the object of a drunken feast. Not in oppressing people, showing how great you are. Not in getting adulation, or multiplying followers, or creating dependants. But in humility. In honour. In carefulness. In recognition that power is not deserved but granted. And true kingship is displayed in the selflessness which gives its life, and is found in the examples of love and generosity which are shining lights in the darkest times.

Jesus will not be made king. But he will be enthroned on the cross. And perhaps Sam Smith did then get it right. Christ's power, Christ's kingship, is seen supremely when all that power is risked, given away. We should read the writing on the wall. And look for acts of service and self offering. Then when we are weighed in the balance will not be found wanting.