

One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Isaiah 44: 1-8 and Mark 12: 28-34

Sermon

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, **Amen**.

Over the last three weeks (four technically – as we had harvest in the middle) we have been indulging in a short sermon series exploring the Trinity. How we experience and respond to God. Last week Sue spoke eloquently about God the Holy Spirit, the week before Robert explored God the Son, and I started the series looking at God the Father through the eyes of Moses. Today we have come to our last sermon in the series looking at ‘One God’. But instead of trying to explain how God is both one God and the three persons of the Trinity, I am going to leave Trinitarian explanations to Trinity Sunday and take a bit of a different tack. This morning I want us to think a little bit about the sovereignty of God.

A sovereign is a supreme ruler, a monarch, someone who possesses ultimate power. In the UK our sovereign is a constitutional monarch, her sovereign power is held by Parliament – new laws are proposed by the Government and then voted on by Parliament. So when our politicians talk about Brexit taking back Britain’s sovereignty, they are talking about Parliament making decisions, creating new laws without the influence of any other ‘higher’ body. Europe in this case. Of course this could mean that Parliament could make arbitrary and biased decisions. That we must all wear red socks on Tuesday or laws that benefit one group over another. However the checks and balances in place across the Houses of Commons and Lords, and the right of all adults to vote in general elections, mean that laws on the whole are made for the common good.

However, as Christians living in England we are subjects not only of the British crown, but also subjects of the Kingdom of God. We proclaim that God is King. That God has ultimate power and authority over our lives. In church we talk a lot about the Kingdom of God. We pray for it, in the Lord’s prayer, we declare it in the creeds. But as Tom Wright says in the introduction to his book *How God became King*; ‘...what would it look like if we really believed that the living God was King on earth as in heaven?’

Our Gospel reading from Mark is one that is pretty familiar to us and I think is a pretty good summary of what it means to have God as King, as sovereign over our lives. We read the words most weeks as part of the gathering liturgy at the beginning of a Holy Communion service. As passage is really familiar, I think it is worth looking at the wider context. At what was happening to Jesus, when these words were uttered.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the temple, in the days before he is crucified for being King of the Jews. In fact he has been in and out of the temple with his disciples several times in what we now call Holy Week. Each time Jesus is confronted by those in authority. Through Mark chapters 11 and 12, each time Jesus visits the temple he is questioned by different religious leaders – the chief

priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and even the Herodian's. Our question this morning is the last of these confrontations.

A scribe, a teacher of the law, witnessing Jesus previous answers asks; 'which is the greatest commandment?' Unlike the previous questions, this is no trap. We might say that this scribe is 'one of the good guys'. This is an honest question, of the 613 commandments found in the Torah, which is the one law that sums up all the other laws? When the chips are down, faced with the whole volume of Jewish law, which one will you grasp in a moment of crisis. Jesus responds with a commandments from Deuteronomy. '**... love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength**' (Deut 6: 5-6).

What is quite interesting to note, is that Deuteronomy speaks only of loving God with heart, soul and mind. Jesus adds loving God with all our strength. Loving God with all of our physical being, heart, soul, mind is not enough. We are to love God with the things that give us strength. This could be physical strength, beauty, wealth, intellect, position, reputation or talent. Loving a sovereign God literally means giving him anything which gives us power.

In fact, this was probably the answer the teacher of the law was expecting. For in Luke's account (Luke 10: 25-28), Jesus does not answer directly, in stead turns the question back on the questioner. And the reason that the scribe knew the answer before he asked it, is because '**Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength**' it is not just a dry bare declaration of monotheism. But a prayer that is literary on the minds and homes of every Jew.

This prayer is known as the 'shema'. Shema just means 'hear' or 'listen' in Hebrew, the first word of the prayer. It is recited daily by those of the Jewish faith and forms the centrepiece of their daily morning and evening prayer. The shema is kept in a phylactery - a small container carried on ones person. Traditionally Jewish men would strap the leather box containing the shema in velum onto their forehead and arm during morning prayer. The shema would also be written as a constant reminder on the doorpost of every house.

Tom Wright, in his book, *How God became King* says that when the rabbis prayed this prayer they spoke of it as 'taking upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom'. To confess that God is One, is to confess that he is the creator, to invoke the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to claim his sovereignty over the whole world. The Jewish law begins with worship, with love for God at its centre. And this is not any sort of love. This is agape love, which Gillian and I have both preached on recently. Love that requires action, love that serves God and his people sacrificially. Recognising that God is sovereign, demands no half measures. It asks for heart, soul, mind and strength – every aspect of human life – to be poured out in worship to the One true God. As Tom Wright says (this time in a different book); 'if we truly lived like that for a single day, God's kingdom would have come on earth as it is in heaven'.

However, I am sure that you will have noticed that Jesus answers the scribe's question, not just with one commandment from the Torah, but two. The second coming from Leviticus 19 (vs 18). The greatest commandment is not only to love the Lord our God with everything that we are and have, but to **'love our neighbour as ourselves'**. This does not mean loving others instead of ourselves. But showing all people the same care and respect that we show ourselves. Again if we all lived by this rule, most of the worlds greatest problems would be solved overnight.

Thus in this short conversation with the scribe in the temple, a day or so before his death. Jesus sums up what it means to really be a subject of the One true God. In turn the lawyer, musing on Jesus' answer, draws out a meaning, which Jesus had not said out loud, but was certainly there. If these two commandments are the primary ones, then all the temple stands for. In its daily, weekly and annual round of sacrifices and offerings, is virtually unnecessary. When a crisis comes, loving God and one's neighbour is all that matters. Everything else is irrelevant.

This is a considerable challenge for all contemporary Christians. Would anyone looking at us – our churches, our lives, our societies that claim to be in some sense 'Christian' – ever guess that God is our sovereign? What is it about our lives that sets us apart as a follower of Jesus? How are we citizens not only of the United Kingdom but also citizens of the Kingdom of God in heaven and on earth? How do we live our lives when we proclaim the One true God is our King and he has ultimate authority over us?

Amen.

Questions

1. If you were King or Queen for the day what one law would you enact?
2. What do you think of Liz's sermon? What stayed with you when you heard it for the first time on Sunday? On re-reading it, what strikes you now?
3. How do you love the Lord you God with your heart, soul, mind and strength? What does living this bible verse look like in your life?
4. To ask the questions posed at the end of Liz's sermon in a different way. If an alien were visiting earth, what about your home, your bank account, your lifestyle, would indicate to them that God is sovereign in your life?
5. What are your strengths? What gives you power? How could you give these to God?2
6. What one action would you take this week to make God more sovereign in your life. Make a commitment to yourself, to God and to other around you (if you are in a house group) to do it!
7. Look at a couple of the bible readings listed below How do they help you think about God as sovereign?

Prayer

Some ideas for prayer this week

1. Pray for our government and all the nations of the world. That they might recognise God as King and put the greatest commandment at the heart of their decision making.
2. Pray for our Queen as she continues to put God as the centre of her life.
3. Pray for the Brexit deliberations and negotiations and for the future relationship between Britain and Europe.
4. Give thanks for the 'strengths' you have been given. Offer them back to God for him to use as sovereign in your life.
5. Pray for the one action that you have decided to take this week, to make God more sovereign in your life. As God for his grace to undertake the action and that it might be fruitful.
6. Pray for a friend or family member who does not yet know God as King.

Further bible reading

You might like to explore some other bible passages about 'One God'

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

Isaiah 43: 9-13

Isaiah 44: 6-8

Hosea 13: 4-8

John 1: 1-5

1 Corinthians 8: 5-6

Revelation 1: 7-8

Bibliography

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Tom Wright, *How God became King* (SPCK, 2012)

Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (SPCK, 2001)