

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 24th November 2019
Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6; Luke 23: 33 - 43

Who is in charge? Who rules? Who rules your life? Who rules the country you live in? In your family, who is in charge? Who rules: is it the most powerful, the eldest, the most popular, the most influential, the best leaders?

I think that if we were to ask Pauline and Justin that question, who is in charge in their family, they might say that it is Caleb who rules the roost. Caleb is just 15 months old and is not the most powerful, the eldest, the most influential, the best leader, and I bet he isn't always the most popular. But, for Pauline and Justin I think that over the past 15 months it has probably been Caleb who has decided all sorts of things: when and for how long they sleep, for example; when they eat; whether they work or not; what they do as a family together, so many things are decided by Caleb even though he isn't aware that they are.

Whatever the size of a family, whether it is made up of two people or twenty, at whatever stage of life, it is never easy to know who is in charge, who rules. Is it the youngest or the oldest? Is it the person with the most responsibility, or the person with the most needs? Is it the person who makes all the decisions, or are these decisions just accommodating the persuasiveness of others? Is it the person who earns the most, or spends the most? Who is in charge, is it those who are serving or those being served?

Families most often have to negotiate this question obtusely rather than confront it head-on, and it is nearly always a negotiation governed by emotions rather than clear statements of reason. Who is in charge, is also something that is ever-changing. At two o'clock in the morning Caleb might be in charge in his home in his way, but when he is 17 and wants to stay out until two o'clock in the morning his parents might feel they should take charge in some way.

It is not always easy to know who is in charge, who should be in charge, or when they should rule, when it comes to families. If that is true of families, it is true of everything, even places where rules can be enforced as orders, and when lines of authority are unambiguous. Classically, Leo Tolstoy's tome *War and Peace* reflects on the extent to which even in an army in a war it is not clear who is in charge. The great battle scenes of the book describe the way orders given by the generals of the Russian and French armies became much changed or redundant by the time those orders make it to the soldiers on the front line. He shows how even the Emperor Napoleon's battle strategy was mostly just a reaction to what his soldiers were already doing on the field anyway.

If that is true in wartime, argued Tolstoy, it is even more true in peacetime. Who is in charge in our country, who rules, who governs the UK?

Famously in 1974, in the face of IRA bombings, a financial crisis, and a three-day working week the then Prime Minister, Ted Heath, called a general election, and his party ran a campaign under the slogan 'Who Governs?' When the answer came the only clear message the electorate sent to Ted Heath was, 'not you!'

Today, our country has been struggling with a similar question, who governs, who is in charge, who rules in the UK, is it parliament, the people, the government, the courts? Don't tell me, but on December the 12th make sure you have your say through the ballot box.

By that time, we will be very much in the season of Advent. It won't just be television debates or party political broadcasts that will be attempting to govern your life, our lives will be swamped by Christmas: Christmas music and programs on the radio and TV; Christmas decorations and much more at home and in the shops; our diaries will be full of Christmas events – who is visiting whom, who is cooking when; the atmosphere in our city and the traffic flow in the centre will be governed by Edinburgh's Christmas. Over the next few weeks, Christmas is in charge, Santa rules.

I remember celebrating Christmas in Israel where for most people there is no Christmas. It is very difficult to be full of the Christmas Spirit and to prepare for Christmas when no one else around you is. It was a bit of a relief actually not to be ruled by Christmas, because at Christmas much of how we feel is governed by the decisions other people – including me, on a Sunday morning – take about what they think Christmas is or should be for you.

Who is in charge, who rules? Who is in charge in your family, who is in charge in your country, who governs our cultural and social lives?

Traditionally in the Christian calendar, today, the Sunday before the first Sunday in the Advent season, is celebrated as Christ the King Sunday. On this Sunday we worship God through Christ by recognising the persistent metaphor throughout the Bible that describes God and Jesus as a king or a lord: the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords.

On this Sunday it would be fair to argue that when we ask the question who should be in charge or who rules our lives; our families; our country; or our culture, the answer should be Christ the king.

But, if our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning is anything to go by, then the God found in Jesus on the cross appears to be a long way from being someone who is in charge, someone who is a king, someone who rules.

Indeed, this title of kingship isn't even something he claims for himself; it is something that is forced on him. It is the soldiers who decide that the inscription, King of the Jews, should be placed above his head. Similarly, at the beginning of his story, in the desert, Jesus was tempted with the opportunity to rule the kingdoms of the earth; he rejected the offer.

What kind of a God is this, who, in Jesus Christ is described as a king, but who refuses to rule? It is the same God we find at the beginning of the entire Bible, the God of creation who after creating human beings to be both good and evil, to know both light and dark, didn't intervene to order around, or to recreate, but instead lets us live our lives, make our mistakes, work it out for ourselves; much like any wise and loving parent would do.

For that is what wise and loving parents do, they don't rule over their children, they love them through self-sacrifice. The question that God in Christ presents us with is not who rules this world, this country, our culture, our lives or our families, it is *what* rules these things; not who rules, but what rules.

For parents trying to bring up children the question that needs wrestled with is not, *who* is in charge here, for that question cannot be answered, but *what* principles are going to govern our family's life together? It is not *who* rules, but *what* rules – and for parents the answer is always love and self-sacrifice. Just as, in the person of Jesus Christ, our Father in heaven - our heavenly parent - ruled through love and self-sacrifice, so should we.

I wonder if Ted Heath in 1974 had not had a manifesto that asked *who* governs, but instead laid out what governing principles the country should have, he might not have got on better. Or at least, perhaps we would be better governed as a country if we as voters focused less on personalities and more on principles, less on who and more on what: what principles should we be governed by. If Jesus Christ was running in this election, I think he would be arguing that our lives and our country should be governed less by him as a person and more by love and self-sacrifice, and by peace, mercy, justice, and honesty.

Who is going to govern your experience of Christmas this year; who rules Christmas? Instead of asking that question why not ask over the weeks of Advent, what is going to govern your experience of Christmas. Is it going to be the experience others want you to have, or is it going to be filled with something you might need?

That is why this year at St. Ninian's we are holding a Blue Christmas service. Our Blue Christmas service is a service that is not governed by those who think the festive season should be jolly, hearty and happy – St. Ninian's offers plenty of those kinds of opportunities. Instead, for one service, the Blue Christmas is an opportunity for your Christmas to feel that it is governed by what you think you might need: a story of peace, hope, love and light in a dark world.

Over the next four weeks why not decide that Christ is your king in your life, and that because he is your king you are going to govern your life with what he governed his: by being a voice of mercy when the media circus clamours for judgement; by being a shout of justice when something wrong is being perpetrated; by being self-sacrificing when everyone else is greedily consuming; by being in yourself a place of peace for others when their ears are ringing with the noise of jingling bells; by being a candle of love in a cold world; by being a beacon of light in the darkness.