

The Anointed King

by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 23rd February 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 2, Matthew 17:1-9

The hymn "Hail to the Lord's Anointed" (based on Psalm 72) was also sung.

Introduction

*Why do the nations so furiously rage together,
and why do the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers take counsel together
against the Lord, and against his Anointed.*

Who here is a fan of Handel's *Messiah*? You will recognise these words, which come from a bass aria near the end of Part 2 of the oratorio. As you will realise from hearing today's Old Testament reading, they are the opening verses of Psalm 2. Handel sets verses 1-4 and 9 of the Psalm in an Aria, a Chorus, a recitative and another aria before concluding Part 2 of *the Messiah* with ... the famous Hallelujah Chorus. The significance of this will become apparent towards the end of this sermon.

This is the second in a series of 8 sermons (including Ash Wednesday) on the Psalms, and today's psalm has been chosen as an example of a royal psalm, one of 11 or more psalms whose themes centres around a king.¹

So what's this all about, then? And what relevance does this Psalm, written thousands of years ago, and set to music by an eighteenth century composer, have for our lives today? To answer this question, I will first talk about what Psalm 2 might have meant for the people who first heard it, and how it came to be interpreted later. And then we'll see what it might say to us today – and, believe me, it has a very important message, as Handel's lyricist, Charles Jennens, realised.

What is the Psalm about?

Psalm 2 grabs your attention from its opening words, by asking a question, *Why do the nations so furiously rage together?* Thinking about all the wars in the world, both past and present, it's a good question. The words used in *The Messiah* are based on the version in the Book of Common Prayer, whereas I will be referring to the New International Version, which has *Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?*²

The next two verses speak of the rulers of the nations gathering together to plot against God and his Anointed One, which means his king. In ancient Israel, Kings were appointed by being anointed with oil. The prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel³, and then David as his successor⁴. David had his son Solomon anointed⁵ (Handel fans will be thinking of the coronation anthem *Zadok the Priest*). The implication of verse 3 seems to be that the rulers who are conspiring together are kings who have been conquered by David and are wanting to break away from his rule, or perhaps the rule of his son Solomon or a later descendant. They are questioning his authority and his right to rule.

¹ The early 20th Century German scholar Hermann Gunkel identified the Royal Psalms as 2,18,20,21,45,72,89,101,110,132,144 (H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, Göttingen 1926)

² The wording of this question is identical in New Revised Standard Version.

³ 1 Samuel 10:1

⁴ 1 Samuel 16:1,13

⁵ 1 Kings 1:39

The rest of the psalm shows how God is on the side of his anointed king. First of all, in verse 4,

The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.⁶

And then he addresses the rebellious kings:

⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
⁶ 'I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.'

Next, it is the king himself who speaks, announcing what God himself has said to him:

He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have become your father.

This echoes words which the prophet Nathan said to David about the son who was to succeed him on the throne:

I will be his father, and he shall be my son.⁷

And in the following verses God tells the king that he has given him authority over the nations, to rule them⁸ and break their power, like someone smashing a piece of pottery. This is a powerful image, which may sound rather uncomfortable to us, but in the language of the time it spoke of absolute power. It is followed by a warning to the subject rulers to "be wise", and to serve God and his king with reverence. On the one hand they are to beware of his anger at disobedience, but on the other, there is blessing for all who take refuge in him, in other words, who trust him for their protection. The Lord's anointed king is to be the representative on earth of God himself, and he was therefore expected to rule not only with power but with justice, looking after his people as a shepherd tends his sheep, caring for the poor and underprivileged. This can particularly be seen in Psalm 72, which is the basis for the hymn "Hail to the Lord's Anointed", which we sang earlier.

If we are to understand the psalm literally, it would seem to refer to the "golden age" of Israel under David and his son Solomon, both of whom had control over their neighbouring kingdoms. God's promise to make "the ends of the earth your possession" a pretty big promise, although hyperbole was very common in talking about kings in the Ancient World. So, for example the last great king of Assyria described himself as "the great king, the legitimate king, the king of the world, king of Assyria, king of (all) the four rims (of the earth), king of kings, prince without rival".⁹

The Messiah

But Jewish tradition very soon came to interpret Psalm 2 and at least 2 other royal psalms, 110 and 72, as referring to another ruler who would fulfil the promises made to King David. And the key to understanding this is the word "anointed", which in Hebrew is *Mashiah*¹⁰, or in the English version of the word, Messiah. The Greek word for the Anointed One is *Christos*,¹¹ or Christ. Jesus' followers claimed that he was the one chosen by God to be the Messiah, and that he will one day rule over the whole world which will be entirely surrendered to him. We see a foretaste of his glory in the story of the Transfiguration in today's gospel reading, where

⁶ Quotations in the rest of this sermon, unless otherwise stated, are from the NIV.

⁷ 2 Samuel 7:14

⁸ In verse 9 many English versions have "break" instead of "rule". The Greek Old Testament has "rule" (literally "shepherd"), which is the basis of quotations from this verse in Revelation 12:5 and 19:15)

⁹ J.B. Pritchard *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton University Press, 1967) p297

¹⁰ מָשִׁיחַ

¹¹ χριστός

the voice of God the Father says *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*¹²

And so in the New Testament Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 with their Messianic interpretations are mentioned several times as referring to Jesus. In Psalm 110 God says to the King, or to the Messiah, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”¹³ In ancient times to be seated at the right hand of the king was to have the highest position in the kingdom apart from the king himself. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter tells the crowd on the day of Pentecost that the risen and ascended Jesus has been “exalted to the right hand of God”,¹⁴ and he goes on to quote Psalm 110:1¹⁵. The same image is used at other times in Acts¹⁶ and in several of the letters of the New Testament¹⁷, and there are also references to Psalm 2¹⁸. When Paul preaches in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, he quotes Psalm 2:7, referring to Jesus:

You are my son; today I have become your father.¹⁹

When Peter and John are released from prison in Acts chapter 4, the disciples who are praying to God for boldness see the action of Pontius Pilate and Herod against Jesus as a fulfilment of Psalm 2:1-2:

²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.”

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

The relevance of the Psalm for today

The apostles who were imprisoned by the Jewish Council in the book of Acts weren't the last to find themselves targeted by political leaders. Ever since the time of Jesus, Christians have been persecuted, which has meant for many imprisonment or even death. The first 3 centuries of Church history were full of persecution and martyrdom, and I would recommend that you read some of the stories of these early saints who had to face the full might of the Roman Empire, people like Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, and Perpetua and Felicity, whose feast day falls on 7th March.

Today, the Barnabas Fund, one of the charities we support at St Michael's, estimates that one in 10 Christians face some form of persecution. Barnabas Fund works especially with Christians in majority Muslim countries, such as Egypt and Pakistan. But they have also drawn attention to the persecution of Christians by the Chinese authorities. Many of you who listen to the BBC will be aware of the wholesale incarceration of more than 1 million Muslims from the Uyghur and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang province in China. But persecution of Christians is much less well reported. There are more than 60 million Christians in China, and the Communist state has been stepping up the pressure in recent years, forcibly removing crosses from their buildings, banning Sunday Schools, imprisoning pastors and closing down churches – even branches of the “official” Chinese churches.²⁰

¹² Matthew 17:5

¹³ Psalm 110:1

¹⁴ Acts 2:33

¹⁵ Acts 2:34-5

¹⁶ E.g. Stephen has a vision of this as he is testifying to the Jewish Council, Acts 7:55-56; see also Acts 5:31

¹⁷ E.g. Romans 8:34, Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 1:3,13. 8:1, 10:12, 12:2. 1 Peter 3:22

¹⁸ E.g. Hebrews 1:5

¹⁹ Acts 13:33

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>

The previous Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, commissioned a report about the state of persecution of Christians worldwide, which was carried out by the Bishop of Truro, Philip Mountstephen, the former General Secretary of the Church Mission Society, another of the charities we support. In a speech last year²¹, Jeremy Hunt mentioned that 80% of religiously motivated discrimination worldwide is directed against Christians. While not all of this is State-sponsored, states that neglect to protect religious minorities against hatred, discrimination and violence are complicit in this persecution, and therefore partly responsible for it.

God is in charge

I began by quoting the question raised at the beginning of Psalm 2: *Why do the nations so furiously rage together... against the Lord and against his anointed?* There may be many reasons. But the writer of the Psalm isn't seeking an analysis of the problem. Rather, it is a rhetorical question, because whatever the reason, his message is that no amount of raging or scheming against God's people will ultimately prevail.

The people of Israel under Kings David and Solomon felt secure that God was on the side of their anointed ruler. The church in Jerusalem in the book of Acts turned to God in prayer as they began to face the same persecution from the authorities that had led to the crucifixion of Jesus. We read that

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.²²

And that brings us back to the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's Messiah. If you look through the scriptures that Handel's lyricist, Charles Jennens, chose, you will see that Part 2 deals with the death and resurrection of Jesus, leading on to the proclamation of the gospel and the persecution of the church, which is implied by the quotes from Psalm 2. But the final scene of this section of the oratorio is set in heaven, as described in the Book of Revelation, where

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever²³.

In the face of opposition, whether from rulers and the state or from any other source, we are to remember that the ultimate authority in this world still belongs to God, who is more powerful than any government or human agency, and who will bring about his good purposes for the world, and especially for those who love him. Like the early disciples of Jesus, faced with threats and imprisonment, we need to turn to prayer, especially for our brothers and sisters throughout the world, but also for ourselves, that we will be willing to bear witness to Christ's truth and love in our own lives. The closing words of Psalm 2 say, *Blessed are all who take refuge in him*²⁴. As we pray for the world and for the church, let us trust in God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who rules over all.

Prayer

Almighty Father,
whose will is to restore all things
in your beloved Son, the King of all:
govern the hearts and minds of those in authority,
and bring the families of the nations,

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/persecution-of-christians-review-foreign-secretarys-speech-following-the-final-report>

²² Acts 4:31

²³ Revelation 11:15, King James Version (slightly altered)

²⁴ Psalm 2:12

divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin,
to be subject to his just and gentle rule;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(Collect for the 3rd Sunday before Advent, Common Worship)