

Of Kings and Justice
Psalm 72:1-7 and Isaiah 11:1-10
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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Advent 2

¹Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
²May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
³May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
⁴May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
⁵May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon,
throughout all generations.
⁶May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
⁷In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound,
until the moon is no more. (Psalm 72)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;

the nations shall inquire of him,
and his dwelling shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:1-10)

The kings of Israel and Judah were such disappointments.

Take Solomon, for example. He started out well enough early in his reign. Remember the time when as a newly crowned king he prayed to Yahweh for “an understanding mind to govern your people,” a mind “able to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:3-14)? And do you remember the incident soon afterward when two mothers came to King Solomon for a fair and just solution to their quarrel? Each mother had an infant son, but one night one of them rolled over in bed and accidentally suffocated her son, killing him. She then sneaked out of bed and switched babies with the other mother. The next morning the two mother argued about which son belonged to whom. So they asked King Solomon to resolve the dispute. Displaying both intelligence and wisdom, Solomon decided to cut the living infant in two halves with a sword, so each mother could get half. Of course this was a ruse; Solomon had no intention at all of using that sword. He merely wanted to find out who the real mother was. The ruse worked perfectly, demonstrating to Israelites far and wide that King Solomon was a wise man who could smoke out injustice and put oppressors to shame (1 Kings 3:16-28).

So Solomon began well, the picture of a model king. But then it went bad—extremely bad. He started some expensive building projects, a temple and a palace, that required large amounts of slave labor, not to mention large amounts of cash (1 Kings 9:15-22). Think about the cruel irony in this: the Israelites who had escaped enslavement in Egypt now have a king who was turning around and enslaving other people! In no sense could this be justice!

Equally bad was Solomon’s decision to marry women who worshipped other gods, because it meant Solomon himself started to worship those same gods. Yahweh got angry with Solomon’s shenanigans, with his injustice toward the poor and his faithlessness toward Yahwistic principles (1 Kings 11:9-13).

We could go on. In the long sequence of kings in Israel and Judah, very few turned out to be good kings. The large majority were profoundly disappointing: they took from

the poor and gave to the rich; they let oppression and injustice roam freely throughout the land; and they promoted the worship of other gods.

This mattered a great deal because the king had enormous power and influence. In the United States, the powers of government are divided into three branches: the executive branch centered in the president; the legislative branch centered in Congress; and the judicial branch centered in the Supreme Court. But in Israel and Judah, those three branches of government were all centered in the king. He had judicial power to adjudicate legal disputes; he had legislative power to enact laws; and he had executive power to carry out the laws and decisions which he himself had made. He was Supreme Court, Congress, and president rolled into one person. This was why the king mattered so much to the country as a whole. If he was wise and good and loyal to Yahweh, then the country flourished. But if he was foolish and wicked and spurned Yahweh (as usually happened), then the country unraveled and ordinary people suffered.

Although Israelite kings had enormous power to damage the country, they also had critics, who were otherwise known as prophets. In particular the prophets Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah levied two essential charges against the kings of Israel and Judah. First, you kings are running after gods other than Yahweh. They are no gods at all, mere statues of wood and metal and clay, but in spite of that you keep giving yourself to ideals and patterns of behavior that Yahweh finds abhorrent.

Second, you kings are letting injustice run rampant through the land. Look at the poor and how they suffer—the poor in Jerusalem, the poor in the villages, the poor in the rural countryside. Your task, O kings of Jerusalem and Samaria, is to defend the poor against the predations of the rich, to work tirelessly for the health and well-being of the poor, and to ensure that they can flourish in safety and fairness. Shame and fie on you for not doing this!

This is the context of our two scripture texts for today. Psalm 72 is often called a coronation psalm because it seems to have been used at the coronation of one or more kings. It's a prayer to Yahweh which asks that this new king will "judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice" (v. 2). It fervently hopes that this king will

“defend the cause of the poor . . . , give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor (v. 4). It reads like a job description that explicitly spells out what the king is supposed to do—what the king’s purpose is.

Specific kings usually failed the job description. Yet the prophets of Israel and Judah stubbornly continued to hope, confident that one day the power and justice of Yahweh would give them a king who does what kings are supposed to do. Enter the prophet Isaiah, who in our second text for today re-imagines the old vision for kingly responsibilities. Such a king is coming! Isaiah asserts. The Spirit of Yahweh will rest on him. He will be wise and perceptive. His overarching passion will be doing what God wants. “With righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (v. 4). The poor and weak will finally have a defender in the national government.

When we Christians read this text we immediately think of Jesus. Our minds leap to the man from Nazareth, who did indeed defend the poor, who was wise and perceptive and just in his judgments. It’s ok for us to read Isaiah in the light of what we now know about Jesus. Yet let us remember Isaiah is first of all a Jewish text from 8 centuries before Jesus. Neither Isaiah nor his contemporaries knew anything about Jesus. Jesus wasn’t in their minds at all. Instead they were thinking of a political king in the mold of someone like the early King Solomon, before he was corrupted by big building projects and puny gods. While it’s ok to read this with Jesus in mind, I suggest our first and most foundational reading should be with the original 8th century BCE context in our brains. Like Psalm 72, this reads like a job description for kings and other rulers.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes when I study texts like these, I get discouraged. Will this ever happen? Does justice ever prevail in national life? How often do rulers actually defend the poor? I doubt; I feel depressed.

So let us learn, you and I, from one of God’s most prominent prophets of our time, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. On September 25, 1977, 16 years before the end of apartheid, Bishop Tutu stood up in King William’s Town, South Africa, at the funeral of Steven Biko, the murdered black consciousness leader. 15,000 people were at that funeral,

and Bishop Tutu declared that white rule was finished. “The powers of injustice, of oppression, of exploitation, have done their worst, and they have lost,” thundered the Bishop. “They have lost because they are immoral, wrong, and our God . . . is a God of justice and liberation and goodness. Our cause . . . must triumph because it is moral and just and right.”

Back in 1977 when Bishop Tutu declared that white rule in South Africa was over, he sounded like a crazy man. Some of you were alive then, and you remember how permanent and steel-clad apartheid seemed in those days. I was a freshman in college then, and I certainly thought Bishop Tutu was hopelessly idealistic, totally out of touch with reality.

But Bishop Tutu was right, as we all know now. One of the Bible’s criteria for distinguishing authentic prophets from false ones is whether their words come true or not (cf. Deut 18:21-22). If someone’s words don’t become true, then you know he or she is a false prophet. But if their words do come true, then he or she is indeed an authentic prophet. Given that Bishop Tutu’s words have long since proved true, I leave you with another of his prophecies:

“In the end, the perpetrators of injustice and oppression, the ones who strut the stage of the world often seemingly unbeatable—there is no doubt at all that they will bite the dust.” This thought delights him. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” he roars.

“Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!”¹

¹ Alex Perry, “The Laughing Bishop,” *Time*, October 11, 2010, 42. Also at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2022647,00.html>