

Sunday evenings, until recently, was a toss up between Poldark and Victoria. Victoria usually won – with its intriguing perspective on the Queen who set the culture of an age. We watched her grow into her authority as queen, through the various machinations and patronisations of relatives and courtiers, with the support of her beloved Melbourne. Her character developed alongside Albert, as she learned what it meant to wear the crown of England. When, and when not, to intervene in the affairs of the state.

Poldark, a good contrast. Here we saw the rich and landed establishment with real and often brutal power over the lives and fates of the working class. With the French Revolution in full swing in France, the fear of popular uprising was evident in the harsh reprisals on any stirring of the masses.

And now, as we marvel at our own Queen's stamina and sense of duty, The Crown – all those episodes – waits to draw us into the life and times of our monarch, as it charts her long reign.

Issues of power and authority are of constant interest to us, it seems. And today, with the theme of Christ the King, when we also celebrate the Kingship and martyrdom of our patron Edmund, those issues come into sharp focus.

We have had much cause to reflect on leadership and power over recent weeks and months, and I am taken back to another Edmund - Edmund Burke, who wrote in the 18th Century, that the greatest threat to human society was the exercise of arbitrary power. Power that has no controls – the power of the tyrant, the power of the mob. So let's take the opportunity to set those perennial concerns in the context of our faith.

Jeremiah tells of the Kingship of David. In the mists of Israel's history, it was David, chosen and anointed by God, who set the pattern of kingship. Jeremiah presents kingship marked by wisdom, by justice and righteousness in the land. David is to rule as a shepherd gathers the remnant of the flock, so that it is fruitful and multiplies. "I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord". This is not arbitrary power, tyranny, exploitative rule, corrupted and cruel. This kingship, ordained by God, from the earliest days of Israel, is service, care and oversight for the greater good of the people. It's a model of kingship from those earliest days that has had an immense influence on our understanding of monarchy today, and through recent centuries.

So when, at the 8 am communion service, we pray that God will 'so rule the heart of thy chosen servant Elizabeth, our Queen and Governor, that she (knowing whose minister she is) may above all things seek thy honour and glory; and that we, and all her subjects (duly considering whose authority she hath) may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey her, in thee and for thee', we are recognising a form of monarchy that continues to be grounded in God.

Many people today deny such authority – and of course, if you don't believe in God, that's rather straightforward. They believe that all authority comes from the people – that only the people have the right to elect their leaders. The idea of a monarch, or leader, who might claim authority from God smacks of the dangerous abuse of power. And, of course, this is not difficult to understand. Many can claim to have God on their side, and do untold evil in his name. Given the lessons of history, we are going to be very careful before we serve, honour and humbly obey anyone.

With a healthy scepticism about how power can be abused, there is, however, much to commend government by constitutional monarchy such as we enjoy. It's full of checks and balances so the monarch doesn't have any real executive power at all; but her authority and influence is significant. A mixed economy between power from above, authority ordained by God, and power from the people, legally and constitutionally bestowed through election. And when the monarch's self understanding is shaped by her Christian faith, it offers to our national life something immeasurably valuable.

For our Christian faith gives us an understanding of kingship that empties itself out as it is exercised. Good authority does this, when modelled on Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve. Christ on the cross is portrayed by Luke as a strange sort of king. With two thieves at his side, with mockery from below, this Kingship is overturned. Faithful to the Kingship of David, the good shepherd of the sheep, Jesus takes us to the heart of a different kingdom. A realm where the only power is love. The only authority is service. Remember me when you come into your kingdom, prays the good thief. The Kingdom of God.

A year or two ago Elizabeth Cook was our writer in residence. She wrote for us a poem, *Edmund of Edmundsbury*. It begins rather wonderfully, with an account of Edmund's coronation. Are you sitting comfortably? [extract from *Edmund of Edmundsbury* by Elizabeth Cook]

The poem tells of the bestowing of God's authority on Edmund; his death for the people. That's why he's a saint: this was a short reign marked by self-sacrifice, enlightened by the light of Christ. And for us? What can we take away this morning, as we reflect on the nature of Kingship, power and authority?

Perhaps a renewed confidence in the Christian tradition which gives a political and theological understanding of authority as service, that can prevent arbitrary power taking hold.

But also, as we begin to look towards Advent, a preparation of our hearts and minds through this coming season, so we are ready, when he comes, for the Christ child to be born in us. A preparation that, with St Edmund, allows Christ to rule our hearts, ordering our passions and self-will towards that other kingdom to which we belong.

The realm of love that takes us into the fullness of God where all is reconciled and at peace, ordered in God's love.