Over the summer we're looking at the Psalms - and, in particular, at some of the different types of psalms - including today's: Psalm 72 - which, for obvious reasons, is called a royal psalm. *Royal* because it's a prayer for Israel's king, probably written to be sung at his coronation, as he's about to begin his reign: v1: 'Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son!'

The question, of course, is which king was it written for? Which royal son? Because, if you look, the heading reads, 'Of Solomon.' So was this written *by* Solomon for his own coronation, or for his son Rehoboam when he became king? And yet as commentators point out, 'Of Solomon' could also be translated 'For Solomon.' So did King David, Solomon's father, write this for Solomon's big day? Because that would fit with how the psalm, and this section of psalms, ends: v20, 'The prayers *of David*, the son of Jesse, are ended.'

The answer is, no one knows for sure. And yet, as you read it, you begin to realise it doesn't really matter, because ultimately this psalm has got to be talking about someone else other than the king of the day. A perfect king, who no king of Israel ever managed to be. The kind of king, or leader, that deep down, all of us want.

The King of Your Dreams

Today is the 12th of July, which means the 4th of July was only last week. So some of you - mentioning no names - might think that to suggest that what you really want is a king is crazy. And yet, doesn't your criticism of kings, or all of our complaints about politicians, tell us something about the kind of leader we want.

I mean, when we complain about taxes, what are we saying? We want a government that gets taxation *just right* - and doesn't take too much. While if we comment about the number of people who are being let in the country, *or* at how those people are treated, we're saying we want a government that lets in, and keeps out, those they should. When we watch our politicians on the world stage and cringe, we're saying we want a leader who represents the people with dignity and doesn't bring shame on the nation. When we're vexed about social issues, we're saying we want a leader, a government who defends the right causes and opposes the wrong. When we're concerned about divisions in society, we're saying we want a leader who unites rather than divides, but who at the same time is crystal clear about who the real enemy is. And when it comes to unemployment, or educational outcomes, we want a leader who'll govern so the economy flourishes and people prosper. And when it comes to justice, we want a leader guided by something higher than personal animus.

So look at Psalm 72, because that kind of leader or government isn't just something western liberals want - ancient Israel wanted it too. Verses 1-2: 'Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.'

So the psalmist wants a king who will exercise a justice that's impartial - that's guided by righteousness - so that all the people, including the poor get the justice they deserve.

Does that mean Government should favour the poor - turn a blind eye to their crimes, while executing judgment on the rich? No. Right back at the founding of Israel as a nation God said to Moses and the people, "You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in

a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit." (Ex 23:2-3).

In other words justice is not to be determined by mob or even majority rule, and the scales of justice are not to be tilted to the poor just because they're poor. And yet, Psalm 72 is clear, when the poor and needy have nowhere else to turn, they should know that they can always turn to the king: Verse 4, 'May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!' And v12-14, 'For he [the king] delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life.'

In Dostoievsky's *Crime and Punishment* the main character, a young man called Raskolnikov, a former student now living in dirt poor poverty in St Petersburg, meets a drunk man called Marmeladov, who's stolen all his wife's money and sold all he has to buy yet more drink. And Marmeladov pours out his life story to Raskolnikov with all his feelings of self-loathing. But as he talks to Raskolnikov he asks him, have you ever been reduced to such utter desperation that you had nowhere left to turn, no one to look to for help?

And Psalm 72 is praying, God may that never happen to your people. When there seems nowhere, no one to turn to, may your people always be able to turn to your king.

But does that mean that if justice is not to be determined by the majority or the mob, is it down to the king to determine right and wrong? No. Look again at verse 1: 'Give the king *your* justice, O God, and *your* righteousness to the royal son!'

In other words, this king will know he's not the ultimate law-maker or judge. God is. And it's only understanding that that can stop government, on the left or the right, becoming tyranny. And that's where, if you're an atheist or a secular person you come unstuck. Because you can genuinely believe in, and love, and work for justice. You can care deeply about right and wrong, and not just care about it, but live it out. And yet, you have no grounds to base that on. No grounds for saying why someone *ought* to behave in a certain way. Or why a crime like rape is always wrong. Because if there is no God, if there is no absolute transcendent law of right and wrong, why shouldn't the majority or the mob say it's ok to exterminate a minority?

And yet, deep down you know that would be wrong. So deep down you know there's a universal law from a universal lawgiver, and you want leaders, and governments to willingly uphold it.

But it's not just justice that this psalm prays for. It's that the land and the people would flourish under this king's rule. Verse 3, 'Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.' So this is not some prospering at the expense of others. This is the whole nation enjoying the bounty of good governance.

And the psalm is praying that the king would lead that economic and social thriving: v6, 'May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth! In his days may the righteous flourish and peace abound, *till the moon be no more*.'

Can you imagine a leader so good you want him to stay in office? A leader so good that he does to a nation what rain would do to our dry and yellow grass right now. A king, the thought of whom is as

good as the smell of rain on cut grass. A king under whose rule the righteous will flourish and peace abound. And that word for peace, and back in v3 the word for prosperity is the word *shalom* - the all encompassing well-being that comes when a people live in right relationship with God. 'May our king be the one who leads us into that peace and that prosperity' the psalm is saying.

Because when he does, it will be like Eden restored. Verse 16: 'May there be abundance of grain in the land; on the tops of the mountains may it wave; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass in the field.'

And as this king cultivates his people, and the land, so they flourish and thrive, he will walk onto the world stage as a leader his people can be proud of: v11: 'May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!'

You know, each election cycle it's as if we place those kind of dreams onto one candidate or another: This will be the one who will bring about the change we want. This is the one in whom we can hope. This is the one who will make us great again.

The trouble is, it never happens does it? Not in Israel then or for us now.

The Stuff of Your Nightmares

Because whoever this psalm was first written for, no king of Israel ever came close to fulfilling it, did they? Think of King Solomon, who started so well, whose exercise of justice was known for its wisdom, and yet, with time, filled his palace with young women - and you don't need to live this side of hashtag-MeToo to see the injustice of a powerful man with a harem.

And when Soloman's son, Rehoboam, takes the stage, what becomes clear is that Solomon's great building projects and expansive foreign policy had been paid for by taxing the people to breaking point. And they come to Rehoboam and plead with him to lower the tax burden. And his response? "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." (1 Kings 12:14).

And one king after another prospered his family at the expense of the people, or deprived the poor of justice, or promoted the *un*righteous, not the righteous, or pursued a foreign policy that left his people under siege and starving. And even David - the king against whose record every subsequent king was judged, took the wife of one of his most loyal men, and to cover up his crime, engineered the death of her husband.

So this psalm sings of a king who will crush the oppressor, but history teaches us: too often it's kings and leaders who become the oppressor. And rather than 'the cause of the poor,' as v3 puts it, being defended, it can feel like the gap between rich and poor grows larger, or through economic mismanagement everyone is becoming poorer.

And in v13, the psalm sings of the weak and the needy being delivered and defended, but in our day we see the weak and the needy - the unborn, the elderly, the sick being aborted and euthanised. As Carl Trueman writes in his recent book, *The Desecration of Man*, 'Ebenezer Scrooge thought the poor should go to the workhouse. We who consider ourselves to belong to a more compassionate age apparently think the feeble should go to the mortuary.'

And it's because, as Lord Acton famously put it, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely', and the leaders in whom we hope fail, that our modern political systems introduce term limits. Because if the psalmist prays for a king whose rule will last v7, 'till the moon be no more' experience tells us, 'err, maybe 4 or maximum 8 years is probably enough.'

In the musical *Hamilton,* King George III reacts to George Washington stepping down as president by singing, "I wasn't aware that was something a person could do." (Song: "I Know Him"). Why does he say that? Because he's baffled by the idea that someone would voluntarily give up control.

But again, what does our desire that a leader would willingly give up control, tell us? That we're looking for a leader willing to sacrifice his own self-interests for the good of his people.

But time and again, the kings of Israel and our own leaders, fail to live up to our dreams. So what should our response be? Grow more cynical about those in power? Tell ourselves that we shouldn't be so trusting, so hopeful? Realise that our dreams are just dreams and the nightmares are the reality?

No! Because woven through this Psalm is hint after hint of a king yet to come.

The One, True, and Promised King

Believe it or not, it was once said that the sun never set on the British Empire - its territories were so vast, and spread so far around the globe that whatever time it was in London one part of the empire would always be in sunlight.

But of course the sun did set on the Empire, as it does on every empire…. Except one.

Look how the psalmist prays for the impact of this king's reign: v5, 'May they [the people under his reign] fear you [God] while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!' Verse 7, 'In his days may the righteous flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more.' And v17, 'May his name endure *forever*, his fame continue *as long as the sun*!'

In other words, this king will still be shining when sun and moon have ceased. And the Brits among us can marvel at our previous Queen's 70 year reign - but it's a few minutes in comparison to the reign of the king of Psalm 72. A reign that's physically impossible for any mere mortal.

Is that just the sycophancy of some royal courtier trying to impress? Well it might be if wasn't for God's promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7, that from the house of David God would raise up a son, "And I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:13).

But then look at the geographic extent of this king's rule. Verse 8, 'May he have dominion from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth!'

And not even Solomon, under whose rule Israel's borders expanded to their widest extent, could claim anything approaching even a fraction of the worldwide dominion of this king. Because while the River of v8 is almost certainly the Euphrates, the fact that this king's reign extends from there to the ends of the earth means that, as Charles Spurgeon, the victorian preacher said, you could pick any river you like and his rule will extend to there and from there.

So much so that his reign will include ,not just Israel, but the lands of the gentiles. Verses 9-10, 'May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.'

And Tarshish was Southern Spain - which for an ancient Israelite was the end of the world. And Sheba and Seba were the Arabian peninsula and horn of Africa - as far south as you could go. It's why the psalmist prays in v11, "May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him.' Because he will be king over every king.

But again, will he defeat his enemies and crush the oppressor? Yes. But his reign will also bring untold blessing to all: v17, 'May people be blessed in him, *all nations* call him blessed!'

Does that ring any bells for you? Because if the *duration* of his reign brings echoes of God's promise to David, the extent and blessing of his reign reverberates with God's promise to Abraham: Genesis 12:2-3, "I will bless you… and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" and 22:17-18: "I will surely bless you… And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."

So the question is: who is this king of endless reign and worldwide blessing?

Well, look how Matthew opens his gospel: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' (Matt 1:1) And Christ means, the anointed one, the king. And so right from the off, Matthew is saying, the fulfilment of God's promise to David and to Abraham, David's seed and Abraham's offspring, the ultimate royal son, the king of Psalm 72, has come.

You see, if we long for a leader who will give up his power for the good of his people, think how Jesus emptied himself of the glory and adoration of heaven, and became a man. And he humbled himself in his incarnation. And who was it who came and fell before him at his birth? The Magi, Gentile leaders, kings from the east. As Matthew tells us, 'Going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, the offered him gifts.' (Matt 2:11) - just as Psalm 72 said they would.

And think how, on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before his crucifixion, Jesus entered Jerusalem, the city of David, the royal city, on the back of a donkey. Why a donkey? If he's this great king, wouldn't a war horse be more appropriate?

Except 500 years before, the prophet Zechariah saw something else about this coming king, and as he tells us, what psalm does he quote? Psalm 72: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey… and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.' (Zech 9:9-10).

And so as Jesus climbs on that donkey and rides into Jerusalem he's saying, 'I'm not just the king of Israel, I'm the king of the ends of the earth.' The king who humbles himself. At whose trial he is clothed with a mocking royal robe, and crowned with a crown of thorns, as the soldiers call out, hail king of the Jews. And they anoint him by spitting at him. And at his crucifixion he is enthroned on a cross with 'Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews' - we might say king of Psalm 72 - nailed above his head.

Why does the greatest and highest of kings stoop so low? To lift you up. Because in v4 the psalmist says, ‘May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor.’ And whatever your income, you and I are spiritually poor, impoverished by our sin, but Christ who was rich beyond all splendour became poor, to make us rich. Rich with his love and rich with his blessing.

And through his death and resurrection, the head of our ultimate oppressor, satan, was crushed under Christ’s heel; and our last enemy, death, was defeated. So you can face it without fear.

And in v14 the psalmist says, ‘From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.’ And how does this king redeem his people? By becoming the ultimate victim of oppression and violence and by shedding his infinitely precious blood in place of ours.

And while the psalmist asks, ‘May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day!’ (Verse 15), Jesus goes one better; because as the writer to the Hebrews says, he’s the king, ‘who always lives to make intercession for [us]’ (Heb 7:25). So while the psalm ends by telling us the prayers of David have ended, the prayers of David’s greatest son never end. And it’s you he’s praying for.

And what of his world-wide rule? The fact that we’re here today, from so many nations tells us, he’s done it and will do it.

So today, if you feel poor and needy, look to your king, because he’s looking at you.

And if you’re in a position of leadership, at home, at work, or in church, exercise that leadership, and any influence you have, by following in the footsteps of Christ the king. And give yourself to his work, and his justice, and his righteousness.

Because it’s in knowing that Christ is king, and that his rule will never be thwarted, that means you can engage with politics and the public square, with Christ-filled hope, and avoid the twin pitfalls of presumption and despair. No politician can ever give you that kind of view of the future.

And as you pray, pray the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done’, and you’ll find it’s Psalm 72 that you’ll be praying.