

A Mirror for Rulers.

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'Give the king thy judgements, O God, and thy righteousness to the king's son.'—Ps 72¹.

THESE familiar words form the opening verse of a Psalm which depicts the ideal of a godly king. Who the king was with regard to whom the words were spoken, we do not know: it was pretty clearly one of the later kings—possibly Josiah. The Psalm reads as though it were written at the time of the king's accession; and the poet prays that God will confer upon him the gifts that will enable him to fulfil the ideal of his office, and to prove himself a beneficent and righteous ruler.

Give the king thy judgements, O God,

And thy righteousness to the king's son.

May God give the king a store of His judgements, or decisions, that he may appropriate and apply them, when cases come before him for judgement; and may He endow him, as the son of a royal father, with a divine sense of justice that may make him a worthy ruler. May he, the poet continues, judge God's people with righteousness, and His poor—those common victims of oppression and injustice under an Oriental government—with judgement; may peace and righteousness flourish in his land; may his rule be as gentle and beneficent, as the rain coming down upon the mown grass, and as drops that water the earth!

Next, taking a bolder flight, the poet prays that his realm may be wider than Solomon's, that all enemies may be subdued before him, and that the most distant and famous peoples may do him homage—

May he have dominion also from sea to sea,

And from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth!

May the desert-dwellers—the wild Bedawin, the free sons of the desert, who will not readily own any superior—may the desert-dwellers bow before him,

And his enemies lick the dust!

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles—of Tartessus in distant Spain, and the isles and coasts of the Mediterranean Sea—render presents!

¹ A sermon preached in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Oxford, on the First Sunday after Trinity (June 18), 1911.

May the kings of Sheba—in South Arabia, and Seba—in Abyssinia—bring dues!

Yea, may all kings fall down before him,

May all nations do him service!

The vision of a world-wide dominion, and of a world-wide homage, rises here in the poet's mind; but the king's claim to it rests upon the justice and mercifulness of his rule. As before, his special merit is his care for the poor and the oppressed—

For he will deliver the needy when he crieth;

The poor also, and him that hath no helper;

He will have pity on the feeble and the needy,

And the lives of the needy he will save;

He will redeem their souls from oppression and wrong,

And precious will their blood be in his sight.

And the Psalmist closes with three final prayers, for the welfare of the king, the prosperity of his land and people, and the honourable perpetuation of his name—

So may he live! and may there be given unto him of the gold of Sheba!

May prayer also be made for him—not, as in the Prayer-Book Version, 'unto him'—continually!

And daily may he be blessed!

May there be abundance of corn in the land upon the top of the mountains;

May the fruit thereof shake like Lebanon:

And may men blossom out of the city like the herbage of the earth!

May his name endure for ever!

May his name be propagated—*i.e.* perpetuated by his descendants—as long as the sun endureth!

May men also bless themselves by him—*i.e.* use his name in blessing as a type of happiness, saying, 'God make thee like this king!'

May all nations call him happy!

Such are the prayers and splendid anticipations, which, on a gala day, were expressed by some poet of Israel on behalf of a newly anointed king of his people. The poet's thoughts move along lines suggested partly by reminiscences of the happy

reign of Solomon, partly by a sense of what the qualifications of a just ruler should be under the social conditions of the time. But the poet, in the hopes and anticipations which he puts forth, includes more than could be realized by any actual king of Israel, and portrays, in fact, an *ideal* king, whose just and perfect rule extends to the ends of the earth, and commands the homage of the world. And in so far as he does this, he looks out beyond the actual king whose accession he celebrates, and constructs a picture of the ideal king of Israel, whom we call the Messiah. But it is not on this aspect of the Psalm that I desire to dwell further to-day.

The blessings of a wise and beneficent rule are often alluded to in the Old Testament. In a poem in the Second Book of Samuel, called the 'Last words of David,' the blessings of such a rule are compared beautifully to the life-giving sunshine of a cloudless morning, when after rain the earth appears clad with fresh young verdure—

When one ruleth over men righteously,

Ruleth in the fear of God,

Then is it as the light of the morning when the sun ariseth,

A morning without clouds, when through clear shining after rain the young grass springeth out of the earth.

And the ideal king is depicted in the prophets as doing, like David and Solomon, judgement and justice in the land; as defending the cause of the poor, and delivering them from oppression and wrong; as punishing the wrong-doer, and by a wise and just rule maintaining the prosperity of his people. In the 101st Psalm we have what has been called a 'mirror for rulers.' A king speaks in it; and he solemnly professes his resolve not, like many an Eastern ruler, to make his palace the home of caprice, and self-indulgence, and corruption, and favouritism, but to walk within his house in the integrity of his heart, to set no base example before his eyes, to cherish no crooked purpose or evil design, to tolerate around him no slander or pride or injustice, but to make men of probity and integrity his companions and ministers, and finally, morning by morning, to hold his court of justice, that he may 'root out all wicked doers out of the city of the Lord.' And so this Psalm is naturally appointed as one of the Proper Psalms for the day of the sovereign's accession.

I have been led to refer this morning to these ideals of kingly rule, on account of the great national event which is to take place next Thursday. More than a year has indeed elapsed since our gracious Sovereign assumed the throne: but it is the striking and impressive Coronation ceremony which seals and ratifies his accession, and formally entrusts to him the high duties and the high responsibilities which in his august office he is called upon to perform. Circumstances have indeed changed greatly since the poets and prophets of Israel wrote. In those days absolute monarchies were the usual form of government in the East; they were indeed the only practicable form of government, in times when the culture and education of the people were limited, when what we should call the political life of a nation had not yet begun to assert itself, and the influence of the people upon such subjects as legislation, the treatment of social problems, and national policy, was practically *nil*. But an absolute monarchy is no longer suited to the wide and varied needs and interests of modern civilization: hence the monarchies which have continued to the present day are mostly limited in power, to a far greater extent than was the case in antiquity; the power of the people, as represented in parliamentary assemblies and other ways, has greatly increased; while in many nations democracies have supplanted monarchies altogether. But whether the government be a monarchy, or an oligarchy, or a democracy, all governments are constituted to maintain the welfare of the people governed by them; and hence the great principles of righteousness and equity and justice, on which the prophets so eloquently insist, and of which the Psalmists sing, remain as the foundations of a prosperous state, and as the essential conditions of its people's welfare. 'Righteousness,' says a Hebrew proverb, 'exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to peoples.' And all history shows the truth of this generalization, whatever be the form of government by which the nation is ruled.

It is true, of course, that the power and rights of the Crown being in modern countries limited, and the population and area of a country like our own, for instance, being so much greater than those of ancient Israel, the sovereign cannot interfere directly, or act personally, to the extent that he did there; he cannot, for instance, like David and Solomon, himself administer justice, or himself

introduce reforms, or determine, with merely the approval of a few counsellors, questions of peace and war: but he can do a great deal indirectly; he can, in virtue of his high position, and the respect which it commands, influence public opinion, and contribute materially to maintain high standards of responsibility and honour on the part of his ministers; he can mark with his approval men of efficiency and high character; he can, by suggestion and example, encourage and promote social reforms. Power need not be the less real, because it is wielded indirectly. Certainly, the most crying evils of an Oriental monarchy—the abuse of power and position on the part of high officials, the extortion and oppression practised by them upon the poor and the defenceless, and the selling of justice to the highest bidder—are, happily, unknown in this country, and do not therefore need a sovereign to put them down. But there are still, it must sorrowfully be confessed, many social abuses rife among the less responsible classes of the community,—among the wealthy, for instance, luxury and selfishness are more prevalent than they should be, and among the middle classes, the love of gain leads often both to impositions upon those who are least able to bear them, and to the terrible abuse commonly described as ‘sweating’: these can only be effectively rectified by moving public opinion; and in contributing towards this end, the indirect influence of the sovereign may be of supreme value. The sovereign is still the head of the State, though he acts largely not personally, but through the agency of ministers, judges, and other representatives, whose appointments are either made or sanctioned by himself. And so in the coronation ceremony, the Sword, the symbol of judgement, and of the power to maintain order, to put down misgovernment, and to punish evil-doers, is presented upon the altar with a prayer, the terms of which are suggested by words of St. Paul (Ro 13⁴), and St. Peter (1 P 2¹⁴): ‘Hear our prayers, O Lord, we beseech thee, and so direct and support thy servant, our king, who is now to be girt with this sword, that he may not bear it in vain; but may use it as the minister of God for the terror and punishment of evil-doers, and for the protection and encouragement of those that do well, through Jesus Christ

our Lord.’ And afterwards, when it has been girt about him, the sovereign is addressed in these words: ‘With this sword do justice, stop the growth of iniquity, protect the holy Church of God, help and defend widows and orphans, restore the things that are gone to decay, maintain the things that are restored, punish and reform what is amiss, and confirm what is in good order; that doing these things you may be glorious in all virtue; and so faithfully serve our Lord Jesus Christ in this life, that you may reign for ever with Him in the life which is to come.’ And the Sceptre, ‘the ensign of kingly power and justice,’ is delivered to him with these words: ‘Receive the Rod of equity and mercy: and God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed, direct and assist you in the administration and exercise of all those powers which he has given you. Be so merciful that you be not too remiss; so execute justice that you forget not mercy. Punish the wicked, protect and cherish the just, and lead your people in the way wherein they should go.’

These, then, are the high responsibilities which our Sovereign undertakes—to maintain effectually justice and good government, to temper wisely judgement with mercy, to have a care for true religion, to defend the unprotected, to punish evil-doers and in general to check iniquity, to correct anomalies and abuses, to guard and preserve whatever may contribute to the well-being of the people. Expanded and enlarged, these are just the same responsibilities which, in the two Psalms which I have quoted this morning, constitute the ideal of a king. Let us be thankful that we in this country are ruled by a Sovereign who, as we well know, will respect and maintain the noble traditions of high endeavour and high achievement which he has inherited from his ancestors; who will devote himself, heart and soul, to the task of realizing, as far as in him lies, the great ideal which the Coronation service sets before him; and who, with God’s help, will pass on to his successors an empire, embracing far-stretching regions in every quarter of the globe, not less stable, and not less well-ordered, and well-governed, than it was when he received it from his beloved and honoured father.