

Christ the King (Rev 1.4-18) by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 21st November 2021
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings¹: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, **Revelation 1:4-18**
Matthew 24:29-31

Note: if you didn't hear the reading from Revelation in church, please read it before reading the text of this sermon.

Introduction: King or Queen for a week

I wonder what you see as the most important problems facing our country and the world at the moment? Suppose that, magically, you could become King or Queen for a week, with absolute power restored to the monarchy, and the guarantee that anything you decreed could not be overturned for at least 10 years. I wonder what decisions you would make?

I asked you to consider this totally hypothetical challenge as a way of getting us thinking about what a country should expect from its government. One possible answer would be that the government keeps out of the way as much as possible and allows its citizens to determine their own destiny, rather than being told what to do by those in authority. Another approach is to accept that for the good

¹ Lectionary Year B readings include the text from Daniel and Rev 1:4a-8

of all, individuals may need to make sacrifices in terms of taxes and limitations to personal freedom.

What we expect of government reveals the values and beliefs we hold dear – personal freedom, community responsibility, care for the vulnerable, and so on. To what extent do we measure up our beliefs and values about society against the values of God’s Kingdom?

The Feast of Christ the King

Today is the last Sunday before Advent, known as the Feast of Christ the King. This was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, originally at the end of October. It was a time of social change, including economic and political upheaval. The Pope explained the introduction of the festival by highlighting many things he saw as wrong in society:

The rebellion of individuals and states against the authority of Christ has produced deplorable consequences ... the seeds of discord sown far and wide; those bitter enmities and rivalries between nations, which still hinder much the cause of peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretence of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; a blind and immoderate selfishness, making people seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage, and measure everything by these; no peace in the home, because people have forgotten or neglect their duty; the unity and stability of the family undermined; society, in a word, shaken to its foundations and on the way to ruin. We firmly hope, however, that the feast of the Kingship of Christ,

which in the future will be yearly observed, may hasten the return of society to our loving Saviour².

Pope Pius clearly saw an unbreakable connection between the reign of Christ as King and the affairs of this world. One hundred years later, we have got used to a way of thinking in which religion is confined to the private domain, whereas politics is part of the public domain. But as Christians, we belong to the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God, and we are called to live out our citizenship of heaven in the way we practise our citizenship of this world.

God or Caesar?

The book of Revelation, from which we heard most of the first chapter just now, was written for Christians who were likely to be experiencing conflicts between these two citizenships. They were under the authority of the Roman Empire which had a highly organised system of government, supported by a strong army, and which facilitated amazing construction and engineering achievements and a thriving economy covering much of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. But economic prosperity and political stability were achieved on the back of the oppression of subjugated peoples, and the institution of slavery. Another cost was the freedom for Christians to practise their beliefs without also having to worship Roman gods in order to show their allegiance to the State.

² Pope Pius XI, encyclical *Quas Primas*, no. 24 Source: <https://simplycatholic.com/the-solemnity-of-christ-the-king/>

Some of those who first received the book of Revelation had already begun to feel the pressure, some as a result of trouble caused by hostile Jewish synagogues, others directly from the Roman authorities. But there was more trouble ahead. The book was probably written during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (81-96 AD), when severe persecution of the Church took place. To get some idea of what it was like to be a Christian in that period, just think about how it was for Christians living under the Soviet Union, or how it is for Christians and other religious minorities living in China today. The key thing a totalitarian regime expects from its citizens is allegiance, or, as a minimum, compliance. As long as you submit to their ideology, do what is expected of you and otherwise keep your head down, you will probably be left alone. Or, if you comply enthusiastically, ignore the corruption or even use it to your advantage, you can advance yourself and the interests of your family. This month we have been praying for the Barnabas Fund, which supports Christians in places where they face discrimination or persecution, either from their governments or from their surrounding communities.

We may not be facing these sorts of challenges in our own country, but we are still under pressure, maybe in more subtle forms, to think and behave in ways that are considered normal by those around us but are actually contrary to our duties as citizens of the Kingdom of God. So today I'd like to use this first chapter of Revelation to explore two questions:

- Who is Jesus Christ, and why should we consider him to be our King?
- What does it mean for us to be citizens of his Kingdom?

Who is Jesus Christ?

On Wednesday I was part of an annual event for Interfaith Week, put on by the Bracknell Forest Interfaith Forum, of which I am a committee member. In most faiths, Jesus Christ is respected as a holy man or prophet. Our Muslim speaker on Wednesday mentioned Jesus in his speech, as Islam believes he was a prophet and accepts his virgin birth. Many Hindus accept that he may have been an incarnation of the divine, as Krishna and others were.

But only Christians believe that Jesus is the unique Son of the one and only God, equal to and sharing the nature of the Creator of the universe.

By the time Revelation was written, Christian theologians hadn't yet gone through all the philosophical aspects that resulted in the Nicene Creed, but in chapter one we can see some pretty impressive claims.

Let's take a look at verse 8, where God speaks:

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The phrase "who is and who was and is to come" echoes God's words to Moses at the burning bush, when Moses asks God his name. "I am who I am" is the answer. The name of

God, probably pronounced *Yahweh*, is connected to the verb “to be” in Hebrew.

But what about “the Alpha and the Omega”? These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The phrase is symbolic of God’s nature being eternal. Now let’s look at verse 17, where Jesus is speaking:

“I am the first and the last...”

And at the end of the book, in chapter 22:13 Jesus describes himself in these words:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

But in addition to sharing the eternal nature of God, Christ is also the one who became human, died and rose again:

I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades³.

You are probably aware that in Greek thought, Hades was the place of the dead. It’s not the same as our concept of hell (whatever that might be). Jesus died, but conquered death and has the keys to release the dead into eternal life. He did this because he loved us and died to forgive our sins, as we read in verses 5-6:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and

³ Rev 1:18 (all biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated)

Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.
Amen.⁴

More than that, Christ not only rose from the dead, but ascended to the right-hand side of God the Father, as Peter explains in his speech on the Day of Pentecost⁵. Stephen, the first martyr, is granted a vision of Christ seated at God's right hand⁶. And in Revelation 3:21 Jesus promises:

To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

In his commission to his apostles at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"⁷. This is why in Revelation 1:5 he is described as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and *the ruler of the kings of the earth.*"

So if Christ is King, where is his kingdom? The New Testament is very clear that we are living in the "in between" times, between Christ's ascension to the throne of God and his Coming to judge the earth. One day – and we can't know when or how – God will cause justice to be done. Evil will be judged and destroyed, and those who have been faithful to God will be vindicated and rewarded.

One of the aims of the book of Revelation is to strengthen and rekindle this hope in the minds and hearts of Christian believers who are about to undergo testing of their faith.

⁴ Rev 1:5-6

⁵ Acts 2:33

⁶ Acts 7:55

⁷ Matthew 28:18

Just as Jesus himself was called “the faithful witness”, so we are called to be faithful witnesses to the Christian gospel.

So right at the start of the book John give this message:

Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail⁸.

This is a reference to the prophecy about the Messiah and God’s people coming to reign in Daniel chapter 7, which Jesus also refers to in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke⁹.

Citizens of the Kingdom

So if the Kingdom of God where Jesus is King has not yet been fully revealed, what does it mean for us to be citizens of his Kingdom right now?

Let’s look again at verses 5-6:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.
Amen.¹⁰

We are part of his Kingdom because in his love he has forgiven us our sins and given us a new status with God. At

⁸ Rev 1:7 (cp Matthew 24:30). This is where Charles Wesley got his “deeply wailing” from in his hymn *Lo, he comes with clouds descending*. The verb translated “wail” can also be translated “mourn”.

⁹ E.g. Matthew 24:30-31; the imagery of the Beasts in Daniel 7 foreshadows the Beast in the book of Revelation.

¹⁰ Rev 1:5-6

Holy Communion every week we are reminded of the blood that Jesus shed for us on the Cross. We now take on the role that God gave to his ancient people Israel when he set them free from slavery in Egypt to be “a priestly kingdom”.¹¹

The main function of a priest is to worship God. For us, this doesn't mean sacrificing oxen (and if you read the “how to” instructions in the Book of Leviticus, you really wouldn't want to do this – for me cutting up a chicken for dinner is as much as I want to do!) or spending all our time in church services. Dedicating to God every hour, every minute of our days and seeking to show our love for him in serving others is part of our worship.

St Paul in his letter to the Romans says:

I appeal to you therefore, my brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.¹²

In our final prayer of our Parish Communion service, we will say that “we offer you our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice”. What does it mean to you to be a living sacrifice?

A challenge for each of us

Is Jesus your King? Have you first of all received him as your Saviour? Do you acknowledge his authority over every area of your life? Kingship is not a concept we are too familiar with today. We like to elect our leaders, and then vote them out again when we get tired of them. The Kingdom of God is not like that. Our King is all-wise and has only the best

¹¹ Exodus 19:6, cp 1 Peter 2:5

¹² Rom 12:1

interests of his subjects at heart. He will never fail us or forsake us. But he demands loyalty and obedience if his rule is going to have its effect in our lives and in our world. He does not invade our lives and take them over by force – rather, he invites us to surrender them humbly to him. Just as he once offered his life for us on the Cross, so today he offers us his body and blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and invites us to offer ourselves, body, mind and soul, to him.

Are there areas of our lives which we have not yet fully submitted to the Kingship of Christ? Are we holding something back from him? Is there a sin we need to repent of? Is selfishness, pride or fear keeping us from obeying him fully? Are we willing to submit our hopes and plans for the future to him trustingly? Are we willing to invest our time, talents and money in the Church so that the Gospel can be proclaimed in word, worship and works?

Last week as we looked at “Facing the Future”, I drew three lessons from Jesus’ teaching in Mark 13: don’t be complacent, don’t be gullible, and don’t be alarmed. In the messages to the 7 churches in Asia which follow today’s reading from Revelation, Jesus gives words of praise and encouragement, but also words of warning – warning about losing our first love or becoming lukewarm, and also warning about compromising with unholy practices and teaching, and ultimately betraying him.

The biggest challenge for the original hearers of the messages of Revelation was to compromise with the false ideology on which the Roman Empire was based – in

symbolic terms, to “worship the Beast”. The book shows that God the Creator and Jesus Christ his Son, are the only ones whom we should worship. Worshipping God means total devotion, not “a bit of religion on the side”. When following Christ can mean imprisonment, torture or death, as it does for many of our brothers and sisters today, the question of whom you worship becomes sharply focussed. Let it not be the case that we, living in material comfort and democratic freedom, end up worshipping the values of this world instead of God our Creator and Jesus our Saviour.

And may this Feast of Christ the King remind us that Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth”, who will ultimately be accountable to him for the way they have governed. As citizens of earth *and* of heaven, let us be faithful witnesses to Christ in the way we participate in, and seek to shape, the values and practices of our country and the places where we live and work.

Prayer

Take a moment to respond to God about what you’ve heard. Maybe you need to talk to him about areas of your life that are not fully submitted to the Kingship of Jesus Christ. Or perhaps there’s a situation in your work, family or other area where you need to seek guidance about how you can be a more faithful witness to the values of the Kingdom of God.