

A sermon given on Sunday 24th November 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Lectionary Year C, Christ the King (Sunday before Advent)

Introduction

Today is the Feast of Christ the King, a holy day which was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, and which has since been adopted by Anglican, Lutheran and other denominations all over the world. Pope Pius was very conscious of the political situation in Europe following the First World War. He was aware that the end of the war had not brought peace and harmony between nations or between different social groups within nations, and wanted to draw attention to the need for all to acknowledge Christ as the Prince of Peace. Pope Pius quoted Cyril of Alexandria, who wrote that Christ "has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and by nature."

The institution of the festival was thus a response to the political situation of the time, and so I make no apology for saying that we too, in our time, need to reflect on the Kingship of Christ with reference to our own political context. And guess what, in just over 2 weeks we will be having a general election, in which we, as Christians, have the opportunity to judge the various options before us in the light of the values of God's Kingdom and the example and teaching of Jesus.

I am not going to talk today about the policies of the various political parties. You can find these by looking online, or listening to the TV or radio. But I am going to say a few words about what it means to have Jesus Christ as your King, and what are the values of his Kingdom that we should judge politicians and their policies against.

Who would you have rule over you?

In the past few days there have been several opportunities on the television to hear the leaders of the main political parties debate with each other, or be interviewed by TV presenters or grilled by members of the public. What do we make of each of these leaders? To what extent do you think that they as individuals, and as representatives of particular parties and philosophies, reflect the values of the Kingdom of God?

Who would you have rule over you?



Left to right: Nigel Farage (Brexit Party), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Jo Swinson (Lib Dems), bottom row: Jonathan Bartley & Sian Berry (Green party), Jeremy Corbyn (Labour), Boris Johnson (Conservative)

Faithful shepherds?

Yesterday John White and I attended the service of Welcome for our new Bishop of Reading, Olivia Graham, in Reading Minster. The Old Testament reading that was chosen was from Isaiah chapters 10 and 11, and spoke of a Messianic King who would be guided by the Spirit of God and would rule with righteousness and faithfulness. There would be justice for the poor, equity for the meek of the earth, and punishment for the wicked. The wolf would live with the lamb, the calf with the lion, and “they 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.”¹

The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah set for today describes rulers as shepherds, and criticises those who cause the sheep to be scattered and who fail to attend to their needs. And so God says, “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.” The same prophecy speaks of the coming of a King who will “deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land”.²

Ezekiel has an even more strongly worded critique of Israel’s “shepherds”, who have fed themselves instead of feeding the sheep, and who have failed to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strayed or seek the lost³.

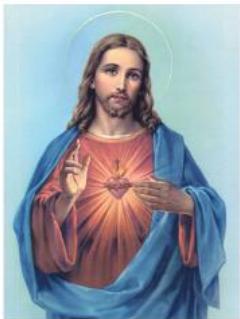
Jesus the Messiah

The parable of the lost sheep, which appears in both Matthew and Luke⁴, speaks of a shepherd leaving his flock in order to search for the solitary sheep that is lost, showing how each person is of value to God. If we are to have a society which reflects the values of the Kingdom of God, it has to care for its weakest members, including those who, for one reason or another, are “lost” - refugees from warzones, the disabled and vulnerable, the mentally ill, children who are excluded from school, young men who get sucked into criminality or terrorism, women who are trafficked into prostitution, to give but a few examples.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. “No one takes it from me,” he goes on, “but I lay it down of my own accord”.⁵

Even those who don’t see Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God have to admit that he must have made a pretty big impact on the society of his day for both the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities to have seen him as a threat. Today’s Gospel reading from Luke shows him being crucified on the charge of rebellion against the Roman Emperor by claiming to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews. As he is led out to die, nailed to a cross and mocked by those watching, Jesus seems anything but a king. But one of the criminals executed with him has the faith and the insight to recognise his kingship in spite of appearances. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom”, he says, and receives the promise “Today you will be with me in Paradise”.⁶

I wonder what each of these images of Jesus says to you about Jesus?



Left to right: Robert Powell as Jesus in Zefirelli’s “Jesus of Nazareth”; anonymous Catholic representation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; image of Jesus adapted from photo of Che Guevara, created for Churches Advertising Network (1999).

¹ Isaiah 11:9

² Jeremiah 23:4-5

³ Ezekiel 34:1-6

⁴ Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:3-7

⁵ John 10:18

⁶ Luke 23:42-43

Christ the Ruler of All

The paradox of Christ's kingship is captured in the words of Graham Kendrick's hymn *Meekness and Majesty*, written for the Spring Harvest conference with that title in 1986. Jesus' suffering is not that of a helpless victim: the "Lord of eternity dwells in humanity, kneels in humility and washes our feet". Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians that Christ,

"though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁷

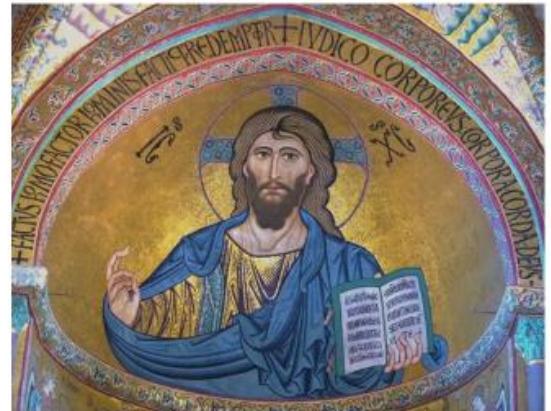
The New Testament frequently speaks of the risen, ascended Christ being seated at the right hand of God⁸. In the ancient world, this represented the highest position in the kingdom apart from the king himself. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus as he leaves his disciples says that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."⁹ Only God the Father is senior in authority to his Son, the risen and ascended Christ.

Christ our King

This huge image of Christ in the dome of Cefalu Cathedral in Sicily shows a traditional Eastern Orthodox representation of Christ as Pantocrator i.e. Ruler of All. His right hand is held in a gesture of blessing, and in his left he holds a book representing the gospel.

St Paul tells us in the letter to the Colossians that Christ "is the image of the invisible God", that "in him all things in heaven and on earth were created". He is also "the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything."¹⁰ Not only that, but "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross"¹¹. The remedy for the brokenness of our world and its alienation from God has been provided by Christ through his death on the cross. And now, Christ's inherent majesty and glory, which he had with the Father from before the beginning of the universe, and which he laid aside to become human and surrender himself as a sacrifice for sin, he has taken up again, and now he reigns over the universe at the right hand of God.

As Christians, our response to his sacrificial love and his work of reconciling us to God is to surrender our lives to him as our King. What this means for our daily life is spelled out in the hymn *At the name of Jesus:*



⁷ Philippians 2:6-11

⁸ Acts 2:33, 5:31 7:55-56, Romans 8:34, Heb 1:3, 12:2

⁹ Matthew 28:18

¹⁰ Colossians 1:15,16,18

¹¹ Colossians 1:20

In your hearts enthrone him;
there let him subdue
all that is not holy, all that is not true;
crown him as your captain
in temptation's hour;
let his will enfold you
in its light and power.¹²

Our allegiance to him as our King comes before any other allegiance, including allegiance to worldly powers and authorities. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God just as much as we are citizens of this world. This does not mean that we should no longer care about the affairs of the world. On the contrary, this is the world over which Christ rules as King. Jesus told us to pray that God's name would be hallowed, his kingdom would come and his will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. One day the messianic prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah will be fulfilled in their entirety, but until then we must pray and work to bring heaven down to earth, just as Jesus did in his earthly life. As citizens of the Kingdom of God we are also its representatives to the world. The world will judge our actions according to what we say we believe.

And one day, we, our earthly rulers and the whole world, will be judged by Christ the King according to the standards and values of his kingdom.

Truly, this Lord Jesus
shall return again
with his Father's glory,
with this angel train;
for all wreaths of empire
meet upon his brow,
and our hearts confess him
King of glory now.

Amen!

¹² At the Name of Jesus by Caroline Maria Noel (1817-1877)