

Christ the King

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 24th November 2024
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14; **John 18:33-37**

Lectionary Year B (Christ the King – Sunday before Advent)

Introduction

The feast-day of Christ the King the feast-day which we celebrate today is one which we have adopted from the Roman Catholic Church, and has only come into our lectionary in the last 25 years. It was initiated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in response to the rise of secularism and in the face of the political and social uncertainties in the aftermath of the First World War. The festival was a reminder that Christ had been given by God “all authority in heaven and earth” was no doubt timely.

Our world today is also in turmoil, with the threat of terrorism, economic and financial insecurity and climate catastrophe. Where can we turn for help? Are our political and social institutions up to the task? While we may still believe that democracy, human rights and a welfare state have an important role to play, many feel that they cannot in themselves be sufficient to save the world from slipping into chaos. We need a higher power to call on.

The King of the Jews

Our reading from John's gospel presents us with two men with authority. Pontius Pilate is the Roman Governor of Judaea,

appointed by the Roman Emperor to keep this unruly corner of the empire in order. The man standing before him looks very unlike a ruler – he wears a simple home-spun robe and his hands are bound with a rope. In the next chapter he will be mockingly fitted out with a purple robe and a crown of thorns. He is accused of trying to make himself the King of the Jews, and so by implication is guilty of treason against the Roman Empire.

Those of you who've seen the Monty Python film *The Life of Brian* will remember the scene where John Cleese asks other members of the Judean Popular Front “What have the Romans ever done for us?” After a barrage of responses from members of the group, he rephrases the question: “Apart from sanitation, medicine, education, irrigation, public health, roads, a freshwater system, public baths and public order... what have the Romans done for us?” “They brought peace” says one.

The first Roman Emperor Augustus, in whose reign Jesus was born, claimed that one of his great achievements was to bring peace to the Roman Empire after years of civil war. The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, enabled the free movement of people and goods, and was one factor in the gospel spreading so quickly in the early days of the Church. But that peace came at a price – freedom.

Many Jews wanted to get rid of the Romans, and terrorist groups like the Zealots did their best to achieve this. Their efforts were counter-productive and were finally rewarded by the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70, which Jesus himself prophesied, as we shall hear in next week's Gospel readings.

The crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with palm branches certainly included many who hoped he would be a political leader and use worldly methods to bring about justice for his people.

So did Jesus fail? What, if anything, has a so-called King who allows himself to be crucified got to offer to a world that needs peace and justice to be restored to it?

The Kingdom of God

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks Jesus. “My kingdom is not from this world”, replies Jesus (36), and points out that if it were, his followers would have fought to defend him from arrest.

But let us not misunderstand what Jesus is saying. His movement is not just concerned with heaven and the inner spiritual life. “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (37). Jesus' Kingdom is greater than all the power of Rome, and his philosophy outshines every political and social ideology that people have invented up to the present day. It is the Kingdom of God, the rule of God in the hearts and lives of ordinary people which transforms individuals, families and communities. It is the power of God to turn us from selfishness and greed to a lifestyle of service and generosity, and strengthens people like Wilberforce to fight against slavery and Martin Luther King to fight for equality. The values of the Kingdom of God which inspire many people today to work for freedom of thought and speech, to rescue street children in many countries of the world from prostitution and

exploitation, and others to work for understanding and reconciliation within communities and families in our country.

Jesus tells Pilate that he came into the world to testify to the truth. When we hear and see the truth which Jesus reveals, the truth about God and his purposes for our lives and the world, and respond to his gracious invitation, we discover what true freedom and true peace really mean – freedom from a false worldview that makes a god of self-gratification and makes all moral values relative; peace with God, with ourselves and with others.

Jesus is not only the King of the Jews, the Messiah promised by God to his ancient people; he has been exalted to the right hand of God, and is King over the whole universe. In our season of Advent, which begins next Sunday, we are called to prepare ourselves for his Second Coming. It is a season of penitence (hence the purple liturgical colour), so that when he comes as judge we may be ready to receive him. One day all exploitation and every worldview will be judged against the standards and philosophy of God's Kingdom, and each of us will be accountable to God for how we have lived, how we have treated others, and how we have submitted to the rule of God in our lives.

Jesus our King

On this Sunday when we reflect on what it means for Christ to be the King, we should ask ourselves: Is Jesus my King? Kingship as understood in Biblical times 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 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 be able 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.

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”. What does it mean to you to be a living sacrifice?

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?

When Pilate came face to face with Jesus, he was challenged to consider what kind of King Jesus was, and what he should do with him. Pilate chose to turn away, and went for the easy option of following the will of the crowd. What will our choice be today?