

The Servant King

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 23rd November 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 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.” This echoes Jesus’ words at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, as he commissions his disciples to carry on his work and says that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”¹ So what does it mean to live under the authority of Christ?

Kingship then and now

Kingship has a very different meaning today from what it had in Biblical times. Then the king was all-powerful, and his

¹ Matthew 28:18

authority was guaranteed by having a powerful army at his command. Today, monarchs have a largely ceremonial function, if they exist at all. The real people who rule are the elected politicians, and our democratic system is intended to ensure “the rule of the people by the people and for the people.” Political parties need to gauge the mood of the public, having an eye to future elections. It has to be said that this system has a serious weakness, in that decisions that would bring about the long-term wellbeing of the nation and the world are often sacrificed on the altar of convenience and popularity. It is also the case that much of the real power in our world is held by multinational companies.

One of the tenets of the democratic ideal, at least as it plays out in countries we usually describe as “the West”, is individual freedom. This chimes with the Christian concept of free will and individual moral responsibility. But the problem with individual freedom is that people tend to make choices based on the benefits to themselves and their immediate families, including choices based on motives of selfishness and greed.

Christianity also has strong moral principles for living together in harmony, mutual respect and selfless compassion. These are the values of the Kingdom of God, set out for us in various parts of the Bible, most especially the teaching of Jesus. They have also permeated Western culture, resulting in the creation of the welfare state, universal education and healthcare. This view of society recognises that human beings are social animals, and that pooling resources enables

everyone to have the chance to flourish, and ensures support for the weak and vulnerable.

The Servant King

The values of the Kingdom of God are most powerfully demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Knowing that God had sent him as the Messiah, the anointed King, Jesus rejected worldly power and embraced his mission to sacrifice himself to redeem the world. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”² Jesus was the Servant King.

Today’s Gospel reading from Luke shows Jesus being crucified on the charge of rebellion against the Roman Emperor by claiming to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews. There’s a strange irony here: Jesus was most definitely not rebelling against the Emperor by political or military means; but by fulfilling the role of Messiah as he understood it, he was challenging the whole system of worldly values which the Emperor represented.

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”.³

² Mark 10:45

³ Luke 23:42-43 NRSV

Christ the Ruler of All

The paradox of Christ's kingship is captured in the words of Graham Kendrick's hymn *Meekness and Majesty*: "Lord of eternity dwells in humanity, kneels in humility and washes our feet". Another well-known hymn, *At the name of Jesus* is based on words from Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he writes that Christ,

being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to
his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁴

Christ our King

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." Not only that, but "through him God was pleased

⁴ Philippians 2:6-11 NIV

to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross”⁵. 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, he has taken up again, and now he reigns over the universe at the right hand of God.

So what should be our response as Christians, if we claim to acknowledge Christ as our King? The answer is spelled out in the hymn *At the name of Jesus*:

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.⁶

Our allegiance to Jesus as our King comes before any other allegiance, including allegiance to worldly powers and authorities. Let us not forget those brothers and sisters in places like China, who have to live with the constant threat of persecution. But we in this country should not take our relative comfort for granted. Our citizenship of the Kingdom of God has to take priority over our rights and responsibilities as 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

⁵ Colossians 1:15-20 NRSV

⁶ *At the Name of Jesus* by Caroline Maria Noel (1817-1877)

would come and his will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. As citizens of the Kingdom of God we are also its representatives to the world. Whatever those around us think, whatever the beliefs and customs of our society, we are called to live out the values of God's kingdom and obey Jesus our King in everything we think, say or do.

For 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.⁷

Amen!

⁷ *At the name of Jesus* by Caroline Maria Noel (1817-1877)