

Christianity with its sleeves rolled up

A sermon prepared by The Revd Andrew Wright for Sun 22 November 22 - Christ the King

Refs: Ezekiel 34.11-16,20-24; Ephesians 1.15-end; Matthew 25.31-end

In ecclesiastical terms the feast of Christ the King is a trendy, modern creation. It was only in 1925 that Pope Pius 11th introduced it in the Roman Catholic Church, and only in 1970 that it was adopted within Anglicanism. In 1922 Pius had become very concerned about a rise of class division and unbridled nationalism (Does that remind me of something?!) "*True peace*", he wrote, "*can only be found under the kingship of Christ.*" In 1925 he inaugurated the festival to encourage ultimate allegiance to a spiritual ruler, not an earthly one.

For a modern festival it can sound a little archaic. To many across the world, talk of "kings" can sound very strange indeed, resonant perhaps of less democratic days, of being subject rather than citizen.

Caution about the idea of bowing the knee to a king has deep biblical roots. The first Book of Samuel records a populist uprising in which the people demand a king. The old system, which could be viewed as more democratic, more local and less authoritarian, no longer held appeal for them. They wanted a king like the other nations. Through Samuel, God warns the people to think very carefully. Kings will conscript your sons into the army. You will be forced to plough his fields and make his weapons. Your daughters will be taken into service. He will take your best land. He will demand taxes - possibly of 10 percent (!) You will be his slaves! The clear message: be careful what you wish for! God also tells Samuel that in this clamor for a king "*they have rejected me as king over them*". Those of you who remember the film *Chariots of Fire* will recall that the deeply Christian Eric Lidell, back in 1924, refuses to run in the Olympic 100 metres heats when he discovers they are being held on a Sunday. One disgruntled member of the Olympic Committee believes this moral stance is an affront to patriotism. "*In my day it was king first, God second,*" he huffs. Samuel might have felt his point well made.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, Israel got their king and much of the narrative that followed bears out the warnings of 1 Samuel chapter 8. However, the idea of kingship became endowed with a mystical quality. The kings are nothing less than God's representatives on earth, ideas that made their way into our own concepts of monarchy, explicit in the coronation service and symbolised with the gift of the orb. King David, for all his abundant faults, is revered throughout the biblical story. The dream of a "new David" is rooted deep in the concept of a future Messiah. Ezekiel, writing more than half a millennium after the first King David, speaks of a future shepherd who God will send to Israel - his "servant David". He "*will feed them and be their shepherd*". The genealogies of the Gospels insist that Jesus is indeed in direct descent from David. In the Messiah, concepts of prophet, priest and king all find union and fulfilment.

All this gives a context for any celebration of Christ as King. Within the developing Biblical tradition and in those early days of Christianity Jesus is seen as that long-expected king, the new David. In today's gospel Jesus refers poetically to "*the son of man who will sit on his glorious throne*". In the opening passage of the letter to the Ephesians, though the word King is not used, a glorious portrait is painted of an enthroned Jesus in whom all things are united "*things in heaven and things on earth*". We, the biblical writers would be keen to tell us, are living in the age of the new king. We owe our allegiance to his kingdom.

What does all this mean for us on this feast of Christ the King? It is a festival that falls on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next Sunday is Advent, a new year in church terms. Perhaps in many ways all that has gone before, all the triumphs and tragedies, the love and the pain of the Christian narrative told throughout the year, are perhaps summed up in the vision of Christ the King. Looking back on an extraordinary year, from this Sunday in November 2020, making sense of Christ the King can be particularly challenging. There are no easy answers, but any understanding must begin with the recognition that this is a king whose greatness is to be found in humility, service and suffering and not in trite answers. For me there is a special significance at this time on reflecting on Christ the King. We live in an era of a certain kind of "patriotic" expectation, one which can so easily spill over into that destructive nationalism and tribalism which is precisely what concerned Pope Pius. It is through an ultimate loyalty to Jesus, to his values, to the path he walked and calls us to walk, that there is hope of a better world.

Throughout the gospels Jesus' story challenges all normal expectation of kings. A humble birth, an ordinary childhood, a life of service amongst the poor, a reticence about making any claims about himself, and a climax to his life of foot-washing, arrest, torture, and execution in the manner of a slave. His kingship

is glimpsed and recognised only by a very few and the very idea is viciously mocked during his trial. Not a king of Samuel's warnings - of exploitation, power-grabbing, wealth building, taxation and abuse of human rights and dignity. And far from being a king who takes the place of God in people's allegiances, this king points the way beyond himself. His focus is on his God, his Father, urging people to make him their absolute priority and to work in partnership to build a very different kind of kingdom.

And the nature of that kingdom? It is rooted in mercy and in love, in justice and in kindness, in service and humility. This is the essence of our gospel today. *"I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me. Truly I tell you, in as much as you gave to this one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me."* Service to this king is not measured in adulation, in submission, in fulfilment of demand to build his wealth or power. Rather it is in practical action and kindness to our fellow human beings, especially those in most need. That is Christianity with its sleeves rolled up. That is the love and loyalty that comes above all others. It is such love and loyalty which builds the kingdom.

To quote from a hymn often sung at this time of year, one with a great tune but a slightly dodgy first verse. That first verse is however countered by the last, a verse perfect for our reflection on Christ the King.

*"And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace".*

Amen