

Christ the King, 24th November 2018

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Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. It is the culmination of the so-called Kingdom Season which lasts from All Saints until Advent in our church's calendar. Gone are the last Sundays after Trinity of the Book of Common Prayer, as has so-called Stir up Sunday, though the collect which begins with that phrase remains as the Post-Communion prayer for this Sunday in Common Worship. We might feel that the church has played some sort of back-handed trick on us. But of course the calendar constantly evolves alongside with the history of the Christian community. The Roman church canonizes new saints – the most recent being the remarkable Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador, who was murdered while celebrating Mass in March 1980. Anglicans don't canonize saints but with the coming of Common Worship at the beginning of this century commemoration of many holy souls came into the Anglican Calendar to augment the very frugal provision of the old Prayer Book. They range from the particularly English like some of our Saxon Bishops, missionaries and abbesses, to more recent poets, spiritual writers, hymn writers, missionaries and social reformers – and even some Bishops. Some too were modern martyrs not unlike Romero – I think of Jnani Luwum, Archbishop of Uganda, murdered in 1977 during the infamous rule of Idi Amin. The observation of the feast of Christ the King came into the Roman calendar in 1925 as an attempt to confront the growing secularism of European society. Remember that the 1920s became known as the "Roaring Twenties" and in France as *les années folles* or the crazy years. This was the era, for some at least, of rising incomes, mass consumerism, and major social change. It was the era of votes for women, the emergence of the so-called "flapper", the heyday of jazz, the dance hall and new dances like the Charleston. (Note that, anyone who watches 'Strictly Come Dancing' on a Saturday night!) Early on in this century, the new feast came into the observation of all those churches which now use the Revised Common Lectionary.

Celebrating Christ as King might well make us feel uneasy in our own political context. Use of the word King has overtones of Christian triumphalism, or even theocracy – and we know only too well where experiments with theocracy can lead.

But we happily sing hymns about Christ as King, as His being the name at which every knee should bow: and there is the artistic genre of crucifix where the Christ is portrayed as a King, not as a broken, dying body. The idea of the Cross as a throne was taken up in Stainer 's famous oratorio of 1887, *The Crucifixion*, where towards the end the chorus sings, “*From the throne of his cross, the King of grief cries out to a world of unbelief...*”

So what should we make of this day? Or to reuse the words of Archbishop Michael Ramsey when talking of the Mass, we should instead be asking not what we make of the day but what does this day make of us?

Let us turn first to the context for this vision of Christ as King in scripture and in practice of earliest Christians.

Today's readings from Daniel and Revelation give us the context for early Christian understanding of the Kingship or Lordship of Christ. The book of Daniel is an example of what is known as apocalyptic writing. In exile he sees a vision of the end times, of the conquest of evil by one who is both like a human and yet clearly divine. To him was given a new sort of kingdom – one which would never end. The writer of Revelation on the island of Patmos directly echoes Daniel's vision in his own apocalyptic account of the last times. But now there is something new. The one who has conquered evil is Christ himself, and that conquest is not through any form of earthly power but through his death. John's account of Jesus before Pilate suggests the same, as we hear in our gospel this morning. Jesus does not deny that he is a King when pressed by Pilate. But he makes it very clear that his kingdom is not of this world or one the world would recognise. He does not have followers who will fight for him. His authority, his reign, derive from his closeness to God, as so much of John's gospel makes clear. He is the very Word of God in and beyond time: he is a witness to the Truth about God, about humanity, and about God's desire to make his home deep with the hearts of his beloved sons and daughters. So Christ does not command people in his kingdom: he loves them into it.

The practice of the early church shows us how early and deeply embedded in the community of faith was the conviction that Jesus was Lord. This was an extraordinary leap of faith from those who had been devout Jews; a transformation of their understanding who Jesus was and is. Jesus is Lord is probably earliest Christian statement of faith before any longer creeds were formulated. *But what might this have meant?* Quite clearly they were coming to see Christ as divine, as God himself. In our passage from Revelation the visionary refers to God as the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, echoing the words of Isaiah. But at the end of the revelation, he hears the living Christ use these words of himself. But the living Christ is the Lamb who was slain. It is the crucified who still carries the marks of his death who calls men and women into the deepest truth about themselves and about God, and who makes that possible through his own self-offering. It is his suffering and self-offering which proclaim his glory.

For the early Christians to proclaim the lordship of Christ was to assert that it was to him that they owed their primary loyalty. His call and his demands took precedence over every existing human loyalty – whether of the family or the local community, race or the prevailing political power. He called them into a new way of living where love was to be the hallmark of their relations with each other and where old forms of status and barriers between people were to be broken down. Reading the New Testament letters we listen to and almost eaves-drop on these early Christians as they struggled to work out just what it might mean in the practicalities of daily life to assert that Jesus was Lord. Of course in the context of the Roman empire and the cult of the imperial family it was also counter cultural and dangerous to make this assertion.

Naming and worshipping Christ as King is counter cultural for us too.

Christ as King challenges the idolatries of our world too. We might not think of ourselves and our neighbours as worshippers of idols – they may not be made of wood and stone like those the Psalmist scoffed at, but they are nonetheless real. What about our contemporary cults of celebrity, of success and achievement, of reputation – not to speak of our society's apparent worship of good looks or the perfect body? Or of possessions which tell stories about our standing as much as serving our genuine

needs? And these are cults – patterns of worship and attention which demand our commitment and effort. Many of these things can well be good in themselves – but not if they are valued to elevate ourselves in various ways and divide us from other people; not if they demean and diminish those who do not possess them. They are destructive idols when they run counter to the values of Christ’s kingdom.

So what are the hallmarks and characteristics of His kingdom? We need to ask what happened around him. This was essentially the reply he himself sent back to John in prison, who had asked if he was the Messiah, the longed-for one who would proclaim the reign of God. According to Matthew (ch.11) Jesus said, echoing parts of Isaiah about the coming Messiah, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”* Or as Luke’s gospel records (ch.4), Jesus read from Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue: *“He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* The hallmarks of the Kingdom are the theme of the wonderful poem, simply called ‘The Kingdom’, by the Welsh priest-poet, R.S. Thomas:

*It’s a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It’s a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself*

*Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

The gospel accounts of Jesus give us deeper understanding of Christ as King through pictures, as well as words. We see him as the man who does not hesitate to touch and heal the sick however poor and insignificant they may be. He eats and drinks with the apparently disreputable; and reaches into messy, disordered lives in a way which horrifies the apparently religious people. He chides his disciples when they inappropriately and ignorantly covet some heavenly share in his kingship and points them to the suffering involved in his authority. He tells them that he is among them as a servant, and he washes their feet at his final meal with them. He dies on a cross out of love for them, leaving only a Roman centurion to testify to his identity.

These images challenge us, just as it did the earliest Christians, to ask what it might mean for Christ the King to be our primary loyalty or the forming desire of our lives. What sort of people are we meant to be? What sort of community does he ask us to create in his name? He offers us a new sort of life as people of his kingdom, through his life and death, and his witness to truth by that life and death. But it is a truth we have to grow into through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a new life begun in baptism when he claims us for his own. But it is a life which he goes on growing in us if we consent to his work in us. He calls us to a continuing conversion of our hearts and lives if he is to be truly Christ our King. In the words of the writer to the Colossians, “*God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son*” where our calling is – extraordinarily - to be made like him – “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” (Colossians 1, 13, 27)