

Sunday 21st November – Christ the King

Sermon by Harold Toms

In recent years this Sunday just before the season of Advent has been celebrated as “Christ the King”. The readings set for today are clearly chosen to illustrate something about the kingship of Jesus. I suppose that living in the country we do live in, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we might think we have something of a head start in understanding the idea of kingdoms and kings. Most years we seem to have some great royal occasion to celebrate, a Jubilee, a special birthday, a royal wedding, when all the trappings of royalty are seen on the streets of London and on our televisions. Golden carriages, crowns and tiaras, pomp and ceremony. Next year we will have a most unusual (it's never happened here before) example as we mark the Queen's platinum jubilee. There will be formal and traditional reminders of the monarch's military power, everything that you would associate with the idea of what it is to be a sovereign.

Our Gospel reading today, however, gives an entirely different perspective to what we mean when we talk about kingship, God's kingdom is very different from our human notions of monarchy. This comes out through the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, the representative of the Earthly rulers in Jesus' time, Roman governor in a province that has been thoroughly pacified. Many of the Jewish people are living under the puppet government of the brutal King Herod. Pilate has the Roman army at his disposal – the most powerful force in the world at that time. Yet Pilate seems very uncertain and indecisive about what to do with Jesus. Were he a strong leader he would either have crucified Jesus without a moment's thought, or sent the crowd packing with the alternative, if they did not go quietly, of setting his soldiers on them. He does neither, being unable to decide what to do. His famous act of washing his hands is ultimately a coward's way of not taking responsibility for something that is actually very much under his control – should he choose to act and not just dither.

Jesus himself has little to say. This might seem surprising when we cast our minds back to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus shows his human nature only too clearly – he doesn't want to die. This is no “suicide by default”. If there were another way then he would take it. It must have been an enormous temptation, when faced with this weak and vacillating Roman governor, to say something, anything to enable Pilate to release him. But anything Jesus can say to achieve that, such as “I'm not the Son of God” or “I'm not a king” would be a lie. As when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, so

when he faces the temptation of escaping by saying what Pilate wants him to, Jesus stands firm.

Jesus must have known what sort of death awaited him. No one living under Roman rule cannot have known that their way of death meant certain crucifixion. One of the most gruesome methods of killing ever devised. It was a very slow, very painful, but above all very public way to die. Jesus must himself, at some time or other, have actually seen crucifixions. The Romans used this method all the time on anyone that crossed them; thieves, traitors, heretics, someone they just didn't like the look of, anyone who wasn't a Roman citizen in fact. Under Pilate's governance there would have been thousands of executions in this way.

Since the very beginning, the Bible has shown us humankind in revolt from their creator God. Adam was unable to submit himself to even one single and simple commandment – not to eat the fruit of a certain tree. When Moses gives the people new laws in the ten commandments they are just as unable to comply. Before they've even reached the promised land, before they've even left the mountain on which they received the stone tablets they're disregarding the law and going their own way. We too fall to temptation and find ourselves taking that easier way, the way that Jesus eschews. But it is because Jesus doesn't fail, because he doesn't listen to that little voice inside telling him that all he needs to do is go along with a lie and he needn't die after all, that Jesus is able to free all of us from the impossible demands of that law.

When Jesus submits himself to the law, that law first declares that he is an innocent man, it then gives him to the people as their King, and then they take him away, in spite of the verdict of the law, to crucify him. But it is because of this, because he was subject to the greatest miscarriage of justice, that Jesus is able to say to each of us "Your sins are forgiven, go in peace." A phrase that is sometimes used, you see it on the side of Churches occasionally is "Jesus died for our sins", but that isn't really quite right. Perhaps it ought to be "Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins".

In Mark's Gospel at the end of chapter ten Jesus tells us exactly what sort of King he is when he says:

"... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

It turns the whole idea upside down. Just imagine at the great state banquet, instead of the servants waiting on the honoured guests it's the other way around. And we know that this is exactly how it was with Jesus. At his great banquet, the last supper with his disciples, as they entered the house he stooped down and washed their feet, the task of the most menial and lowly of servants. If we go back then and think about all those things that we associate with Kingship, we find that they're all still there in Jesus, just in a way that is startlingly different.

Take the glorious carriages, replaced by a humble little donkey, or the jewel encrusted crown replaced by one of thorns. A triumphal procession there certainly was, but out on the streets and not behind barricades and rows of police and security guards. Jesus actually right in the midst of the throng. And then there is the throne, which was that most evil instrument of torture and death, the cross. Our king giving his life a ransom for many, because that, ultimately is the heart of Jesus' kingship. He is worthy to be our king because he was prepared, on that unlikely throne to take the punishment for our sins, to give his life a ransom for ours. All the things we associate with kingship, just the other way around, changed and different. Not of this world, but of a better world, one that God through his great love has nonetheless brought into this world.

Amen.