

Christ the King

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 20 November 2022

Readings: Colossians 1 vv 11-20 and Luke 23 vv 33-43

The Church's year comes to a rousing conclusion with the feast of Christ the King. This feast is relatively modern, instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to growing secularism and secular ultra-nationalism.

Whilst I have never had any doubts about the kingship of Christ, the death of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth and the accession of King Charles III has made me think afresh about kingship. I have just about become confident in singing 'God save the King' in the National Anthem, and with the prayers in the Prayer Book service we use at 8 am each Sunday. But I sang the responses in Evensong a fortnight ago for the first time since the accession. I was very focussed on getting that right after years of singing the familiar words.

Whilst the Accession Council, in which the former Prince of Wales was recognised as King Charles III, was a formal and tradition ceremony, there are already hints that the Coronation may be less elaborate than that of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, suggesting a different style of monarchy, and certainly a different style of kingship to that of George V and George VI.

There is a huge and significant contrast between the experience of kingship in the Old Testament, from Saul, David and Solomon onwards, and what we see of Jesus' servant kingship. That was equally a marked contrast to the kingship of Herod – and even more so to that of the very distant Roman emperors, whose power was exercised by Pilate and other local officials.

Servant kingship is only part of the story, only part of our experience of Jesus. The reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians is a great hymn taking us deep into the mystery and wonder of Christ. It is not dissimilar to the prologue to St John's gospel. We are lifted out of our preoccupation with the trivial and the mundane, out of the concerns of everyday life. The repetition of 'all things' is a clear statement that we are being invited to consider the big picture. Nobody and nothing can be beyond the scope of God's concern. Everything matters to God – which is part of the reason for the coming of Jesus amongst us. We matter. We are important.

But there is more. Yes, Paul writes powerfully about all things being held together in Jesus, about the big picture. And yet our relationship with God through Jesus is intensely personal. Jesus is reconciling us as individuals, 'by making peace through the blood of his cross'. He deals with the messiness of our lives, graciously and lovingly.

The gospel reading, taking us to Good Friday and Jesus' crucifixion, may seem at first sight to be telling a very different story. We may even think that we are seeing a different person to the Jesus whom Paul describes. But that is not the case. St Luke leaves us in no doubt that we are seeing the kingship of Jesus, even at this moment of utter and complete vulnerability.

Just a few days before the crucifixion, on the day we call Palm Sunday, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph. After his betrayal into the hands of the authorities, Jesus is no longer the king mounted in triumph but a beaten man going to a criminal's death, hanging between undoubted criminals, apparently vanquished. But even the criminal hanging next

to Jesus can see through and beyond the human wretchedness: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' The kingdom is near. Here, in this apparently defeated figure, in the face of cruelty and shattered hopes, we see the sovereignty of God. We are urged to look beyond the immediate horror and degradation to see God at work, exercising his kingship.

We are invited to keep this this feast of Christ the King as Safeguarding Sunday.

At the beginning of the service, I read the Summary of the Law. Jesus refers to the 'most important commandment' (Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength); without stopping for breath, he goes straight on to say the second is 'love your neighbour as yourself'. But Jesus then says, 'There is no commandment greater than these'. Notice the grammar: Jesus treats both as one commandment. For Jesus there is no divide. We can't give our all to God, love him completely - and then forget about the rest. No. Jesus ties loving God, acknowledging his kingship, and loving our neighbour inextricably together. Our love for God is incomplete unless that spreads to loving others too. And that's what safeguarding is all about. Loving our neighbour as ourselves. Wanting for our neighbour exactly what we want for ourselves. Making sure that they are safe.

The priority is building a healthy culture in our churches that encourages honesty and openness, where (for example) each individual is respected, valued and nurtured. Where every individual is allowed to ask questions and disagree in a safe and respectful manner, albeit with proper boundaries. We are tasked with being aware of other people's needs and vulnerabilities. As a community we must respond. As Christians we must love our neighbour in whatever way it takes. As a church we must strive to ensure that our work is done safely. Sadly, this has not always been the case. Much harm has been done when we have got it wrong. It is a matter of huge regret that people have been damaged by failures.

John Wesley had a wonderful way of summing up these words of Jesus, when he said, 'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can'.

Doing that with a heart for God, doing that with a heart for the vulnerable, doing that in the safest possible way.