

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – Christ the King – 20th November 2022

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In September millions of people watched the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, some in the streets of London where flowers were strewn in front of the hearse, lining the way and keeping a respectful silence. Many more millions watched the pageantry and spectacle on TV, quietly at home. She had been a much-needed beacon of constancy, dignity, and a deep sense of duty, bolstered by a very strong Christian faith which she was not afraid to profess publicly. Although hers was a role of influence not power, she made her mark in the lives of millions. Her death was peaceful, at home in Balmoral, surrounded by people who loved and cared for her at the end of a very long life. In May next year her son will be crowned King in another beautifully orchestrated display of pomp and ceremony.

King Charles has waited a very long time to be crowned King, at the age of 73 he is the oldest person to ascend the throne. Born into a life of privilege and responsibility, a life lived in the glare of the spotlight of media attention, he may have wealth but his is not a lifestyle many would choose despite the material luxury he is surrounded by. And of course, he had no choice either. He may well have been happier as a farmer and gardener but that was not to be.

King Charles the III is probably the embodiment of what we nowadays think of as a King, someone surrounded by wealth and glamour, with an important role but not actually in charge of anything – that is left to his government. He won't be asked to lead his armies into battle, despite his military service.

What a contrast to today's readings, all about Christ the King, a poor man who was brutally tortured, made to stagger to his place of death, killed when still a young man and buried in haste. He wasn't a military commander, he didn't live in a palace

in the lap of luxury, he didn't have wealth or any kind of status. He was born in a stable and brought up as a carpenter's son. How could this man have been a King? Even the sign fixed to the cross piece that Simon was forced to carry, saying 'King of the Jews', was nailed there in mockery. We all have a pre-conceived idea of what others should be like, and this Jesus didn't fit that idea of a Messiah, God's Holy One, sent to save the Israelites. They thought their true King would be like David, a soldier, someone who would lead them into battle and win against the hated Roman occupiers of their land. The message of Jesus, of love, simply didn't fit. If they'd thought about it, then Jesus's message and preaching, his displays of compassion and healing, would ultimately mean the end of war and aggression if everyone followed them. They still would. We would have no more wars, no hunger, no homelessness, no cruelty to the weak. It would indeed have ushered in a new world, the like of which had never been seen before – one which deep down we all long for but have little idea how to reach.

Jesus knew what the consequences would be of his death, and said to the crowd of weeping and wailing women, that they should not cry for him but for themselves. Those who were deeply ashamed of never having children, he says will be better off soon as they won't know the heartbreak of seeing their children crucified in front of them, when disaster strikes the people and they will wish that the mountains would fall on them and cover them. He is no rebel troublemaker although he is dying the death of one. He is, he says, the green wood. What does he mean by that? Well, if you try and set fire to green wood, wood that is still full of water, you'll struggle to light a fire. It's necessary to let the wood dry out, lose weight, become as they say, tinder dry. Then the wood will catch fire at a spark and cause huge destruction if you're not careful as we have seen in so many parts of the world this summer. So if Jesus is the green wood, and he, with all his urging for ways of peace and love is being tortured and killed, what will happen to those who are in effect dry wood – the rebels, the young hotheads eager to cause trouble for the Roman authorities? If they catch light, the reaction will be catastrophic for the Israelites. Rome will stamp out any resistance with callous savagery, so much so that all those caught up in it will be thankful they have no children to see grow up and become the rebels so meticulously hunted down and dying an agonising death on the cross as Jesus is about to do now through no fault of his own. And of course that is just what happens a few decades later.

Jesus is fulfilling his destiny of service to his sheep, his lost people, by dying a death normally reserved for rebels, and criminals. Everything about him during his life, spent offering peace and hope, mixing with the wrong people, healing whoever needed it, warning of what will happen if the people don't listen to him and mend their ways, has been at odds with his people's preconceptions. Because of that they wouldn't stop and think. Wouldn't recognise him for who he really is. Wouldn't see that he was the real deal, not just some rebel commander about to get them all into deep water.

It's summed up neatly by Luke in contrasting the polar opposite reactions of the two men crucified either side of Jesus. One joins in with the crowds taunting Jesus but the other realises that whilst he and the other one are in this situation due to their own acts, Jesus isn't. He believes in Jesus and is rewarded by him, being promised that he will be in paradise that very day. Like a king, Jesus promises him a place of honour and bliss.

Despite the jeering, the taunts, the cheap wine that only the poor drank, his clothes being raffled off, the pain, the distress it is causing his mother and others, his disciples running away and all the horrendous exhausting things that have happened to him in the last 24 hours, Jesus, unlike the majority of martyrs who died cursing their torturers, astonishingly prays for them to be forgiven.

With the benefit of hindsight, history has demonstrated to all Christians that Jesus was indeed the King. I began by thinking that there was such a contrast between Christ the King who owned so little and our own monarchs with their wealth and jewels and land, the ceremonies that they take part in, the public displays of so much wealth. But then I read about King Charles and his long fought battle against the damage we are doing to our planet, his son the future King, selling Big Issue magazines for charity, the charitable work the Royals do day in day out. And I attended sung communion with Garry at York Minister this month.

As we sat waiting for the service to begin, I looked up at the glorious, beautiful soaring stone ceiling, the skilled craftsmanship at every level that went into creating this temple to Christ the King. Then the massive organ roared out its music, we all stood and the choir, robed and in procession, filed round and down to the front, with the clergy in their gold and red robes, led by a big cross. No palace could be more fitting for any King than this cathedral. The service continued with

the sacred music performed flawlessly by the choir and all was beautifully done. We were given communion from silver dishes administered by the clergy in their robes embroidered with gold and it was all very special. I have to admit, I do love sparkly things!

And we heard a sermon which spoke about being Christian. About how we are identified as Christians by our actions – whether we feed the poor, care for the sick, give shelter to the homeless. The preacher pointed out with a wry smile that here she was, telling us what to do to be better Christians whilst in her golden robes, and how that was a dilemma for her. And I must admit, it was for me too. I wonder what Christ makes of it, our humble King for whom material things meant and mean nothing, that we lavish so much time and money on chapels and churches and cathedrals? Jesus died for us, for our sins. There is as far as we know, no Plan B there – he died once for all. It doesn't do any harm now and again to think about what it really means to be his Body, to do his work.

Amen.