



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*22nd November 2020
Christ the King*

Reflection

Next week will be Advent Sunday, but today we're closing the liturgical year with a relatively modern feast, Christ the King. Introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925, John Muddiman tells us it was originally intended as *a counterblast against the rise of neo-paganism and fascism*. Perhaps it's as well that we still celebrate it today!

But how effective is it to represent Christ as a king? Won't it vary according to a person's views about monarchy? Our British Queen has many admirers: Jacky, who's joining us from the East Riding this morning, told me last week how special it feels for her that she'll be serving as High Sheriff during the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Year. There's enormous goodwill and affection for Elizabeth II, and whether republican or royalist, few people would be so ungracious as to fail to acknowledge her dedication and service over the years.

Like all British monarchs since Elizabeth I, she also holds the title of Supreme Governor of our church, but unlike some of her predecessors she is obviously sustained by a deep personal faith. Her namesake, Elizabeth I, had the wisdom to change the title of "Supreme Head" that her father had awarded himself. It was not just a sensible political move, given the opposition within the Church. Elizabeth, raised as a Protestant, would have been very aware of what the Bible tells us: Christ alone is the Head of the Church.

Henry VIII joins the ranks of many other kings and queens across history who have hardly reigned "happy and glorious", so when we think of Christ as our King, earthly kingship should

surely not be our starting point. On Palm Sunday the crowds went wild for their king as he rode into Jerusalem, but Jesus was not the Messiah they wanted. Five days later he would make this clear to Pontius Pilate: "*My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my servants would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But for now my kingdom is not from here.*" (John 18.36).

Yet it's natural that artists often turn to images of earthly kingship to picture Christ in his majesty. At the top of today's service sheet you can see the Christ the King who hangs behind the high altar at SS Augustine, Chesterfield. With magnificent robes and golden crown, his welcoming arms outstretched, he's an imposing figure. Some of you have met David's daughter, Helen – she has joined us online for services from Kenya. This was the image of Christ she knew from childhood, but when she was in her teens we moved to a new church, St Bartholomew's, Old Whittington. You may be shocked when I tell you her reaction when she first walked down that aisle. Seeing the image of Christ on the Cross in the stained glass of the east window she said, "Ugh! There's no wonder people are put off!". I'm sure her views have changed over the years, but such negative reactions are very common today. Like me, you've probably heard people pronounce with great confidence that far from being life-giving and full of hope, Christianity is a strange religion obsessed by sin, guilt and death.

So perhaps today is a good time to look at the images we commonly use in church. An empty cross, as we see at All Saints' Marseille, may look less majestic than an image of Christ the King, but it might offer a more hopeful expression of faith. It points beyond the crucifixion to the risen Christ. Three representations: the suffering servant, Christ without a face or Christ in glory. All three are equally valid.

We recognise Christ as our risen King but we cannot ignore the wounded images we'd perhaps rather not see. It isn't possible to divorce our faith from the reality of Christ's suffering: he is the Suffering Servant: there are no short cuts to Easter Day. To understand the Resurrection we have to live through his Passion and Crucifixion, and then his Ascension into majesty. Nor can we ignore Christ's physical absence among us: today we meet him and each other in the *spiritual* Communion of the Eucharist. Whether the medium is the physical consecrated bread and wine or the internet and our computers, we ultimately encounter Jesus in the depths of our being. This isn't an external, physical process – spiritual communion happens within us.

The relationship into which Jesus invites us is not a worldly bond between a king and his subject: *I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.* (John 15.15). Jesus invites us to a very different way of being with him. In today's reading, St Paul talks about the power of the risen Christ: *God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.* (Ephesians 1.20-23).

In what may seem ironic for us, this great power did not come through the usual ways of exercising dominance. The selfish ego normally drives the human will, but this is not the way of Christ. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes: *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: who existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross.* (Philippians 5. 2-8)

Had we had the good fortune to meet Jesus of Nazareth, would we have seen an “empty” man devoid of personality – a bland, characterless being? Far from it! The more the selfish self disappears, the more space opens up for God. Making space, letting the mind of Christ come into us, requires a step back from our usual human ways of thinking and being.

Preaching at St John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong last year, Tom Wright observed: “Instead of following the “time” of the world, following the values that divide and damage, we live in God’s time, the time of the kingdom, in God’s moment. This ultimately means living the values of the Kingdom of God in our world.” In what is for many of us the prayer we know best, we ask that “Thy Kingdom come”. Living that kingdom life, willing God’s kingdom here, ‘on earth as it is in heaven’, means that in all that we do, we work for that kingdom. Discussing the Parable of the Talents, John reminded us last week that we must never underrate the gifts that we have been given to use in his service.

If you look at the photo at the end of your service sheet, you can see a second image of the same Christ the King. If the weather’s good, sometimes the sun shines in from the rose window at the west end. Its rays fall directly on the figure of Christ. His features disappear, dazzled by the brilliance of the sun. He becomes transfigured, transformed - Christ the King, in his glory. At the end of today’s service we’ll pray the well-known Collect for what some of us still call “Stir-up Sunday”:

Stir up, O Lord,
the wills of your faithful people;
that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works,
may by you be plenteously rewarded.

Let us pray to be stirred up, transformed *so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.* Stirred up so that in Tom Wright’s words, *instead of following the “time” of the world, following the values that divide and damage, we live in God’s time, the time of the kingdom, in God’s moment.*

Amen

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