

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

Sermon – Last Sunday before Advent – Christ the King

24th November 2024

All Saints', Marseille

Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister

Today we celebrate Christ the King and all our readings refer to power, to kings and kingship.

Starting with the passage from Daniel, with his vision of the present and the future, just before the passage we've just heard, he describes a great storm and four huge beasts of terrifying appearance. In our passage he describes the Ancient One and then someone of human appearance who was to be given the rule over all people. What to make of this? I'd be no good at interpreting dreams any more than I am at cryptic crosswords. But this lays the foundation for the readings to come. The four beasts represent the kingdoms of the world, with all their cruelty and violence; the Ancient One, God sitting in judgement; and then if we read on, the human like figure is the Messiah, Christ, who will come after and rule eternally. Daniel describes the Ancient One and his power in the best way he can – as all in white. White in the ancient world was a difficult colour to achieve – there was no bleach or detergent, and white was seen as indication purity and wisdom. Sitting on a throne of fire – one of the most difficult things for man to control – and with endless angels attending him – Daniel is doing his best to describe a being of such power and authority that actually there are no words to describe him. But it's setting the scene.

As is the psalm – where the psalmist is again trying to describe the awesome and indescribable power of the Lord in human terms. He uses the images of floods and raging seas, more immense power beyond the control of humanity. And he emphasises the everlasting nature of God.

In Revelation Jesus Christ is more of the focus, and now we are getting into him being the ruler of all Kings of the world. Finally we get to John's description of Jesus's encounter with Pilate and the rather strange conversation they had.

I find this encounter quite strange. Jesus has been before the Jewish religious leaders all night as they tried him for whatever they could think of to get rid of him, until the early hours of the morning. They hadn't followed their own procedures as Jesus pointed out to them – the High Priest should gather evidence from witnesses, not interrogate the person directly. He was following the Roman system, somewhat hypocritically. This hypocrisy continues as giving up, they take him the military headquarters of the Roman Governor but refuse to go in as that would make them unclean. Trying to get an innocent man killed wasn't obviously as serious as their remaining ritually clean. Apart from anything else, the Jews had no authority to condemn Jesus to death so they needed the Romans to do that for him.

Pilate didn't usually live there in Jerusalem, he had much more comfortable living quarters on the coast, but with the Passover and the influx of people into Jerusalem, he liked to be there in person in case of trouble. So he's not at home, and then he's woken up in the small hours of the morning to deal with a group of religious people, towing a bedraggled and harmless looking man with them, demanding the death penalty. They won't come in so he has to go out to them.

Pilate is not a man to be trifled with, brutality and atrocities against the Jews were not a problem for him provided it kept the peace. But mindful of the tensions running high in the city he goes out to the religious leaders to see what the fuss was about. They couldn't tell him anything that made sense to him, other than that basically Jesus was a bad man. They had no real charges, no evidence, no proof. So Pilate tells them to go away and sort out their issue themselves. They won't because they don't have the authority to condemn Jesus to death.

Rather than go through all this outside the barracks, Pilate goes back in and orders Jesus to come in too. No-one is bothered about Jesus becoming unclean. He begins his own formal inquiry, to see if Jesus was a rebel who might threaten Roman interests, if he had an army behind him. Clearly Jesus doesn't, he's no militant rebel, no threat to Rome. Any kingdom he may have isn't of this world. Reassured, Pilate

shuttles back outside to tell the people waiting there that he finds no case to answer. For all his reputation, Pilate is interested in the truth of who this man is.

The concept of King has changed dramatically since Pilate's time. Then, a King was someone who ruled absolutely, had complete authority and was the leader of the armed forces. Kingdoms were taken by force, men put themselves on thrones by assassinating their predecessor, and had immense wealth. They could and did take whatever they wanted – money, property, men, women and children as slaves. Nowadays Kings aren't so powerful, many are titular heads of state with influence but no actual power and much more accessible. King Charles for example found himself being hugged by the New Zealand ladies rugby team recently – and didn't seem too unhappy about it. More recently the King of Spain was pelted with mud by angry subjects incensed at the lack of support they had been given following the disastrous floods. Kings and Queens have gradually lost their mystique and authority of the centuries, but we are still fascinated by their lives and their wealth. There's something very glamorous about a Royal.

So how do we explain Jesus as King? We can't see him, we can't hug him, we can't see his kingdom. He doesn't travel in a golden coach, or visit endless good causes. He was born to a humble carpenter in somewhat shady circumstances, had no wealth, didn't seem to own anything. He had no army and was appalled at violence. And he wasn't in the slightest bit interested in material goods.

Hence he replies that his Kingdom is not of this world. No, it isn't – his Kingdom is much more subtle and much more important, everlasting and fundamental. His Kingdom is in our hearts. We catch a glimpse of it now and then when we really listen to his edicts and follow them through – when we feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, provide for the poor, nurse the sick, clothe the poor and above all, love one another. We see it when we let go of material things and opt out of the rat-race of working long hours to buy goods that will only give us a moment's pleasure before we crave the next car, phone, clothes, or whatever.

Next Sunday is the start of Advent, the countdown to Christmas. In amidst the hustle and bustle of all the preparations, families arriving, endless cooking,

decorating our homes, lets hold tight to the words in the last verse of the carol “In the Bleak Midwinter”

“ What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a wise man I would do my part, yet what can I give him: give my heart.”

Then we will have the chance to enter into his Kingdom, if we let ourselves be ruled by Jesus Christ.