

Feast of Christ the King

Matins

Isaiah 4.2-5.7; Luke 19.29-38

Today on this last Sunday of the Christian year, we straddle two calendars. The Book of Common Prayer calls this the Twenty Fifth Sunday after Trinity, or the Sunday next before Advent, popularly known as 'Stir up Sunday' because of the collect which begins 'Stir up, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people' and is a reminder to stir the Christmas pudding.

But since the Advent of Common Worship in 2000 the Church of England has kept this day as the Feast of Christ the King; the culmination of this season of remembrance and of looking towards the Kingdom of God. And though you can't be much more in tune with the Book of Common Prayer than by attending Choral Matins the readings set for the day are for Morning Prayer for the Feast of Christ the King. Thomas Cranmer would have been surprised. One might say sneakily and perhaps unfairly that the Book of Common Prayer is more conscious of the status of earthly kings than it is of the kingship of Christ. After all it is the Prayer Book that justifies the supreme position of the sovereign as seen from the perspective of the Tudor monarchy.

And if really want to be picky and Little Britain-ish about the Feast of Christ the King you would perhaps regret that the Feast itself is of Continental and Catholic origin, inaugurated by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a counterblast to secularism and fascism. It was meant to bring confidence to a Church that was beleaguered, and to send a signal to aspiring European politicians that the Church was still a forceful presence in society. When the Feast was adopted by the Church of England there was not in fact much controversy. Those who looked naturally towards Rome wanted to be in tune with the Roman calendar; those of more evangelical and Protestant persuasion had long been drawn by the theme of the Kingship of Christ, and the only real murmurings of liturgical dissent came from those liberal minded republicans in the Church of England who disliked the emphasis on Christ as king on grounds that it smacks of triumphalism. Something of that nervousness broke through when the Church debated the naming of

this season leading up to Advent which was being called the Kingdom season. Nervousness prevailed, and though we boldly call this the Kingdom Season here at Christ Church, the liturgical books call the season *From All Saints to Advent*.

There are two reasons, I think, why we should meditate on our Lord Jesus Christ as 'king' this morning. The first is given in scripture. Christ comes into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of his Passion riding on a donkey, from the Mount of Olives, fulfilling the prophecy that David's anointed son would come to his city. He receives the acclamation of the crowd gathered for Passover: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'. 'All glory, laud and honour to thee redeemer king, to whom the lips of children make sweet hosannas ring'. There is something very powerful about hearing this story, just before Advent, just before we are plunged into the secularity and excess of the run up to Christmas. The kingship of Christ in scripture always has the note of irony and subversion. He is the king born under the royal star who shares a stable with the beasts. He is the king with nowhere to lay his head, he is the king whose followers desert him, he is the king whose only crown was of thorns. He is, in other words, not like any *reigning* king, whether a wise and benign one, a crackpot dictator. They are both in the business of managing power and other people's expectations in the real world.

And yet in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Christ's call comes to us with an authority and authenticity all of its own. We know even as we listen to the Palm Sunday story of the kingship of Christ, that it will end in the human tragedy of the cross, and that somewhere in that tragedy lies salvation for ourselves and for the world. 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'.

So remembering Christ as king along the lines of Scripture is to be immersed in the crazy logic of the Christian Gospel. Where Christ crucified is the power and wisdom of God; where God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. One of the great decisions that confronts people who undertake the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola comes in the Second Week when they

are invited to mediate on the two standards: that of Christ and that of the world. The challenge is to hear and respond to the call of Christ the King and to respond not just by waving palm branches but by setting one's feet on the way of the cross along with the poor and the betrayed and those who are treated with contempt.

But there is another reason for contemplating Christ as King which is worth reflecting on. And this is because of its relevance for our understanding of the person of Christ. When the Feast was inaugurated by Pius xi it was an assertion of Christ's kingship not only in the Church and in human affairs, but in the universe, in the cosmos. For those of you who are familiar with the Nicene Creed you may have noticed a clause towards the end of the middle section: 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end'. The words 'and his kingdom will have no end' were added to the Creed of Nicea at the end of the fourth century to exclude what had become regarded as a heretical interpretation of Christ's kingship. Marcellus Bishop of Ancyra had been a strong supporter of the Council of Nicea. He agreed fervently with the 'homousios' clause, that Christ was 'of one substance with the Father', or one in being with the Father as we say. But he had his own particular spin on this. So closely did he identify Christ with God the Father that he taught that at the end of time Christ (and the Holy Spirit too for that matter) would simply be absorbed into the Father's being. In fact if push comes to shove he thought that Christ and the Holy Spirit were really only temporary manifestations of the Godhead, brought forth as God might produce two arms, to do what was necessary to create and redeem the world, and then when the job was done, the arms would fold back into the body. I don't remember much from biology lessons at school but I do remember an illustration of an amoeba with its pseudopodia, putting forth a false foot, which would then retract back into its amorphous substance. Anyway Marcellus claimed to have scripture on his side, because Paul speaks I Corinthians 15.24 of Christ handing over the kingdom to God the Father and of God becoming all in all.

The Church was not convinced that Marcellus's doctrine of a temporary Christ really expressed the heart of the Gospel. The text in Corinthians had

to be weighed against what the Church had come to experience in its worship and prayer: that Christ, though one with the Father, was also distinct, not a temporary manifestation to be forgotten at the end of time. So the creed came to say: 'he will come again in glory...his kingdom will have no end'.

I think this is immensely challenging and consoling. To claim that Christ is the king of the cosmos is to claim that ceation has emerged for the purpose of self-giving love, and that in some sense (and this can be a dangerous claim) sacrifice is where life is renewed. If love is at the heart of things, we should not be surprised that human beings have evolved to have empathy, or that we find the seeds of empathy in the life of the animals who share our world. It says that if we are willing to bear the cross in this life we will come to the share the crown of the kingdom, not because we are good but Christ is love. It says that at the heart of the Universe there is not a dictator demanding our worship, nor a void for human power to fill; but a call to come home to our Father, to find our home within the joy of the Trinity .

When I moved to Oxford at the end of August and before I was installed here, since I had nowhere official to go to I went into the Church of St John the Evangelist, New Hinksey. As I am living in half of its original vicarage and the church is literally on my doorstep it seemed a natural thing to do. The vicar, my neighbour Father James Wilkinson, has inspired a re-ordering and refurbishing of the Church which has been hugely successful. On that first Sunday I came in to find myself greeted and met by the figure of Christus Rex on the East wall behind the altar; the priestly king reigning from the cross, his arms outstretched in welcome.

That is the welcome, the invitation, to everyone, to our Church and to our world. As Pius XI was trying to say, the kingship of Christ outlasts our economic convulsions, our tragic conflicts, our personal griefs. He is there on the cross of the world, bearing our sorrows, and yet mysteriously undefeated. Because in the end his kingship is not of this world, but of the world to come. And that world to come is always present to us, and always

coming, and we pray for it every day as we say, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done'.