

Sunday 20 November Christ the King

Today is the last Sunday before Advent. The end of the Church Year as we know it, and the Feast of Christ the King. This is a feast which only entered the Roman Catholic Calendar in 1925 and the Anglican Calendar in 2000. The political turmoil in Europe after the Great War and the rise of secularism was in part what led the Pope at the time to suggest this new feast of Christ the King.

The word King is a familiar enough one but I wonder what the word immediately conjures up for you? Perhaps some childhood memories *I'm the King of the Castle, get down you dirty rascal!* Maybe you think of something quite different like majestic Kingcups in the fields, or a point scoring chess piece. King has a ring of command, of authority, power, of ruling status. Even the Kingcup rules supreme in the fields as the King of buttercups.

Who do you say that I am Jesus asked his disciples as some were calling him prophet, others Rabbi or teacher, often it was Master. Peter, often impulsive but here with great insight says *You are Christ, the Messiah*. In effect, then, *you are the King*. Jesus doesn't deny this but redefines kingship for Peter.

Then later in the trial of Jesus and standing before Pilate, Jesus is accused of saying himself that he is the Messiah. *Are you a King, then? Are you King of the Jews?* Pilate asks. Jesus answers ambiguously, *You say so*, implying that Pilate has chosen the word and that his understanding of Kingship was very different from Jesus'. Not long after this exchange they finally allow Jesus the title King of the Jews. But in something worse than a cruel joke, they nail both that title and Jesus to a cross.

They called him King because the word he'd so often used as he taught them about the end for which the whole of creation had been destined was *Kingdom*.

What, then, is the Kingdom over which Christ the King came to reign, a King who determinedly confused his followers in spending the greater part of his time on earth turning the worldly concept of power and greatness on its head? A king whose throne was a cross and whose crown was a crown of thorns.

The prophet Isaiah, along with various Psalms and other biblical passages, had spoken of God's coming kingdom as a time when God's promises and purposes would be fulfilled and Israel would be rescued from pagan oppression. People were anxious for a Messiah, for a King to put the world to rights, but the way Jesus was going about it was hardly what the Jews had imagined or indeed wanted.

My Kingdom is not of this world, they hear. What can he mean? How easily he might have driven the Romans into the abyss, sat upon a throne, had his subjects pay homage to him, legions of angels wait upon him and reigned the super King that was the dream of the Jews. But no such kingdom would have served the ends of God his Father in heaven and this was something which Jesus' disciples just couldn't get their heads round.

John the Baptist when preaching in the wilderness had said one was coming who was so much greater than himself that he wasn't even worthy to stoop down and unfasten his sandals. Yet three years later, at the Last Supper, this one so much greater takes a towel and washes the disciples' feet. They'd have to learn that in God's terms greatness is defined in humble service, in loving because we ourselves are loved and in forgiving because we're forgiven. Hard for them. Hard for us.

They'd have to get to grips with totally new values. No discrimination against the poor, crippled, blind, lame, because in the Kingdom there is a place for everyone whoever they are. It's tempting to say *Things have changed now, society no longer discriminates against the disadvantaged, against the mentally ill, against the elderly and so on*, but would this be true? I suggest there remains, for example, in much of society today a patronising attitude towards at least some of these.

We've been talking a fair bit about religion generally, about faith and about values in our home groups studying the Gospel of John, as that gospel in particular constantly raises big questions. How to respond, for example, when we're approached on big issues *like* The Kingdom of God. We talk about church and how it doesn't always seem to add up to what we are searching for. But what are our expectations? The church isn't an end in itself, it's only an agent, an instrument of something so much bigger.

And that something so much bigger is of course what Jesus was trying to get across to his followers. We're anxious about getting to grips with it all today just as Jesus' disciples struggled at the time to understand this King in their midst. But the early Christians, as well documented by Paul, came in time to realise that Jesus was indeed the human face of God and they called him both Lord and King because they could recognise his true authority in their lives, his enduring values of love and forgiveness.

What we are being asked to do as Christians today, hard though it seems to be, is to be agents *ourselves* of God's love, for that is what Jesus came to promote, a Kingdom of Love. If we understand nothing else, we can try and understand love. A simple enough word but with huge dimension.

These last Sundays before Advent our readings have centred on the ultimate coming of the Kingdom of God and of End Times. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is in the world even now but that we await it to come in its fullness. That fullness must surely mean a Kingdom in which no one is superior or inferior in worth; and one which redefines in total the true nature of power and authority.

As we work towards such a Kingdom, which might at times seem a long way off, I believe that as Christians there is something we can always do – and that is to immerse ourselves in the Holy Scriptures. For to travel with the Word of God through the Holy pages of Scripture is to journey through a Kingdom of Love and to understand a little *of* that Kingdom over which God's Son came to earth and ruled as King.

Amen