

Feast of Christ the King

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-38a

I wonder what comes to mind we think about kingship - what kind of images does this theme evoke in us? Perhaps we might naturally think of our own monarchy here in Britain with its great pomp and pageantry and its fascinating history. The great state occasions like the opening of parliament, the royal weddings, and the tragic events like the death of Princess Diana - all remind us that the institution of the monarchy remains very much an intrinsic part of the fabric of our society. However much, though, the queen tries to come across as being 'down to earth', unfortunately all the protocol and etiquette that goes with her constitutional status as the monarch means that a certain distance must be maintained between the queen and her subjects.

Alternatively, we may think of the kings in the Old Testament. Such was the importance of the kings of Israel and Judah that they were seen as being anointed by God himself. If you look at the books of

1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings, it seems that most of the kings failed to live up to expectations; in particular, they often encouraged the worship of other gods, as a result of which they are described by the biblical authors as having done "what was evil in the sight of the Lord." In fact, only four of the kings are actually talked about in a positive light, the most well-known of which, of course, is King David - though even he was by no means perfect.

So whatever images of earthly monarchy we think about - both past and present - it's obvious that there's always a certain detachment between the monarch and his or her subjects and they are certainly not infallible - just like the rest of us they are sinners.

By contrast, the kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ and his Kingdom are of an altogether different order. And our Bible readings this morning clearly highlight something of how Christ's kingship and his Kingdom contrast with earthly kingdoms and nations states.

The Gospel passage forms part of the Passion narrative in John when Jesus is brought before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The Jewish authorities have reasoned that by ascribing to Jesus the title 'King of the Jews', this could be perceived by the Romans as a threat to their authority; in this way they were trying to bring down on Jesus the death penalty. But Pilate remained unconvinced by their reasoning, so much so that he had even said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." And in his conversation with Jesus, it's evident that Pilate maintains a somewhat disinterested and dismissive attitude. But what we do get here, during the course of this conversation, is the emergence of two very different approaches to kingship. On the one hand, we have Pilate and the might of Rome - representative of earthly kingdoms and authority. And on the other, we have Jesus' kingship of truth. So I think there are at least four specific characteristics of Christ's kingship and Christ's kingdom which emerge from this and the other readings.

First of all, Jesus' Kingdom and his kingly reign are not of this world – they are of a different order - "Jesus answered [Pilate], 'My kingdom is not from this world.'" The Greek word translated here as 'kingdom' is 'βασιλεια' - the word implies 'reign' or 'kingship' rather than denoting an actual geographical territory. It's rather about Jesus reigning over people's hearts and lives. And furthermore, as the prophetic vision of Daniel declares, Jesus' Kingdom is an "everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." This does not mean that the Kingdom does not in some way influence this world - earthly societies must in some way aim to reflect the values of the Kingdom of God, but in the end, they can only be an imperfect reflection of that Kingdom.

It seems that problems arise when earthly states and kingdoms have thought that *they* can create a perfect society - a kind of 'heaven on earth', which will somehow last forever. Take the Roman empire itself, of which Pontius Pilate was representative. At

the time of Christ, its influence extended far and wide, dominating large parts of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa; but despite this, it eventually declined and was no more. Nearer our own time, we have the case of the Soviet Union - that great attempt to create a communist utopia - yet that too came to an untimely end as the Berlin Wall came tumbling down in 1989. Earthly states, kingdoms and empires rise and fall, but the Kingdom of God and of his Christ is everlasting. In the same way, earthly rulers hang around for a short while and leave their mark on society (for better or for worse), but in the end they are only temporary - they are as 'ships that pass in the night'. But the kingly rule of Jesus Christ is eternal - it lasts forever. Indeed, as our passage from Revelation reminds us, Jesus is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." And we, as Christ's followers, have to remember that we are not only citizens of his eternal Kingdom, but we are called, each one of us, to be *ambassadors* of that Kingdom – in our everyday lives witnessing to the truth of Christ's eternal kingship over all things.

Secondly, Jesus' Kingdom and his kingship are not defended by armed force - Jesus says to Pilate, "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews." In fact, the popular expectation amongst the Jewish people at the time of Jesus was of a sort of 'political' messiah who would come to overthrow the Roman authorities who were occupying their land, thereby liberating them. But Jesus clearly repudiates any kind of political kingship. His kingship is a much more profound, spiritual one, and his kingdom is defended *not* by military might but by the spiritual weapons of truth and love.

Over the centuries much blood has been spilt over the defence of certain territories, and I think that probably most of the conflicts in the world today are all about who has the rightful control over different geographical areas. What's more, the preservation of the nation state has been seen as of utmost importance, and armed force is the first thing countries would normally resort to in order to defend themselves if they feel in any way threatened

by other nations - many countries even take pride in threatening other countries with their nuclear capabilities.

But there have been some movements which have sought to follow the way of *Christ's* Kingdom, and have attempted to resolve major difficulties and injustices in the world by resorting to non-violent means - the struggles of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr are two obvious examples of this; they in some way bear witness to the power of truth and love over violence. They chose to follow the way of the Kingdom of God. And so we ourselves are called to be agents of Christ's reconciliation in our *own* lives - bringing love where there is hatred - whether in our families, in our neighbourhoods, at work, in our leisure, and so on.

Thirdly, Christ's kingship is characterized by suffering and service - in the reading from Revelation it says, "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his *blood*.....to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever." In Christ we have a very different type of

king, a king who lays down his life for his people. His crown is first and foremost a crown of thorns, not one studded with expensive jewels. So, in Christ, we have a king who is not aloof from our own sufferings. Whatever our sufferings and trials at this present time, let us be assured that Jesus is not just sympathetic to our situation but also empathetic - he can fully identify with our situation as he has been there before.

At the same time, although rulers of modern democracies are in theory elected to serve their citizens, more often than not, those in positions of authority tend to maintain a certain aloofness/detachment from those they are meant to be serving, and indeed, they often 'lord it over' them. By contrast, Christ the King served others first, he spoke to those to whom no one spoke, he dined with the lowest members of society, he touched the untouchables. He had no throne, no crown, no entourage of servants or armoured guards. As the late Charles Colson put it, "Kings and presidents surround themselves with minions who rush ahead,

swing the doors wide, and stand at attention as they wait for the great to pass. Jesus said that He Himself stands at the door and knocks, patiently waiting to enter our lives.”

And fourthly, Jesus’ Kingdom is a kingdom of truth - Jesus says to Pilate, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Jesus’ kingship is identified with truth; Jesus testifies to the truth about God’s love and justice. So why is it that the world fails to recognise Jesus as king supreme over all? Well, it’s because only those who are in a right relationship with God, those who have received Jesus into their lives as Lord and Saviour, who believe in his name, who have been given power to become children of God - only they can truly understand Jesus’ witness to the truth and recognise his kingly reign.

By contrast, Pilate’s cynical statement, “What is truth?”, epitomizes the response of those who do not believe; in fact, you could say it epitomizes the

attitude of many in our own day. Pontius Pilate would have heard so many claims to the truth; in his day there were so many Roman and Greek philosophers hanging around who claimed that they had found the ultimate meaning of life. Pilate was obviously disillusioned by all this, so evidently he had retreated into a cosy agnosticism. And today, many respond in much the same way as Pilate. Confronted with so many different philosophies of life, they give up bothering to search for the truth and instead content themselves with their life in the here and now - attempting to sideline the ultimate questions of life - eternity, God’s judgement, justice for those who suffer injustice in this life, and so on. But as the late Billy Graham reminds us, “Even the sceptic searches for truth, for man needs truth as the animals do not - not just the truth of the physical sciences and mathematics, but the truths about his being and why he is here.” And this truth is not to be found in abstract concepts but in our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

So, how might the characteristics of Christ’s kingdom

and kingship we've considered impact upon our daily lives? Well, they point to the fact that, as Christians, we are citizens not just of an earthly kingdom or nation, but most importantly, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God and of his Christ. We are, of course, required to respect earthly rulers. But as citizens of God's Kingdom we are called to live in such a way that can often be at odds with the ways and attitudes and thinking of society at large. We are called to speak out against perceived injustices, to seek peaceful solutions to difficult situations, to dedicate ourselves to the service of others, to live our lives in obedience to God's word.

May we allow Christ our King to rule our hearts, our minds and our wills. For he is the King of kings and Lord of lords. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.