

Sermon preached at
Wymondham
Christ the King 2024

Daniel 7.9-10, 13, 14; John 18.33-37

The first sermon I ever preached (attempted to preach) was when I was a prospective ordinand. My vicar said, well, you've put your head above the parapet, so you better try preaching. And it was for Christ the King. Exactly twenty years ago! Wisely he wanted to go through the sermon in advance, which he did in a very - shall we say - grounding way. Instead of talking through it, he first sat me down and he read it to me. It was rather a sobering experience, as you might imagine. So this feast of Christy the King can be a bit triggering for me!

In that first draft I'd launched out with a long and gripping account of how the feast came into being - which was only in 1925. All very fascinating, actually, but you can find it all on Wikipedia...

Whatever the origins of the actual feast day in the church calendar, calling Jesus King obviously sounds familiar and appropriate. It's a way of describing Jesus with biblical warrant. We're certainly used to hearing about the kingdom of heaven in the gospels, so by extension there must be a king. In the gospels we occasionally hear this explicitly of Jesus. There is his descent from King David, as the angel Gabriel tells Mary at her Annunciation. Then there is his entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrate on Palm Sunday, which unambiguously channels a

prophecy in Zechariah, of the coming of Zion's king riding on a donkey.

That prophetic picture of kingliness speaks of humility and gentleness, rather than the pomp and power normally associated with a king. It's a classically subversive move, finding its fulfilment in Jesus. The prophecy was about a king, but just as all our (and their) usual assumptions about kingliness come to mind, he subverts them by riding on a donkey, a poor man's beast of burden. Such humility, which Zechariah imagined, reaches its climax in the humiliation of the cross only days later, complete with its ironic inscription 'the King of the Jews'. But of course that isn't the end of the story, and the resurrection reveals the real power that was at work.

Two thousand years later we have any number of worship songs about the Jesus the 'risen king', a phrase first used in late 19th C hymn writing, I think. It's not a phrase we find in the bible. It's understandable: but is it helpful?

It's understandable because we want to reach for a word which sounds appropriately magnificent and worthy of our praise and awe. But why 'king'? Does any use of that word now or back through history get close to the reality and meaning of Jesus, the Jesus of the gospels? Over time the idea of a king - at least in this country - has evolved from a despot, someone with pretty much absolute power, to what we recognise now, the constitutional monarch, with virtually no actual power but -

ideally - commanding great loyalty and respect.

Where along any of that historical spectrum is there a version of being a king which is right to use of Jesus? There has been the occasional king or queen who's been made a saint, but they are the exception to the norm. Jesus is neither an absolute ruler nor a revered figurehead, nor anything in between. Edward the Confessor, Henry VIII, even Charles III - none of these are worthy comparisons.

We get two vital clues in the gospel reading we heard, from the story of Jesus' encounter with Pontius Pilate: clues to how we can use the language of kingship about Jesus.

First, Jesus responds to Pilate's this-worldly question - 'are you

the King of the Jews?" - by saying 'my kingdom is not of this world.' It's as though he's saying 'if you want to call me a king, then none of the ways you use that word in this world are true to me'. So he was telling Pilate 'I'm not leading a political insurrection'. He was telling the Jewish authorities 'I'm not claiming to be the liberating messiah you think you're waiting for'. And he was telling his followers (us included) - 'in the kingdom of heaven, kingship is not like anything you could imagine of a king in this world.'

It's the same turning upside down of a familiar image that we get with, for example, Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Whereas a shepherd earns his living by raising sheep for slaughter, Jesus as Good Shepherd gives *his* life so that the sheep might live.

The second clue is that Jesus sidesteps any of the normal attributes of kingship and talks about something far deeper, far more penetrating. His way of being is not about wielding power in the way that any talk of kingship suggests, but rather is about testifying to the truth. To listen to Jesus is to 'belong to the truth'. That's a beautiful phrase, and a powerful idea. It gets us way beyond the idea that the truth is simply a fixed set of beliefs, which we have to have in order to be a Christian. It is much more about a relationship with Jesus, a sense of his being with us and our belonging to him. It is all-encompassing, engaging our hearts and bodies as well as our minds.

All this is captured perfectly in that Jesus hymn in Paul's Letter

to the Philippians, in chapter 2. So, let us be humble in self-giving and love, just as Jesus was - the Jesus who emptied himself to the point of death, but whom God exalted such that *at the name of Jesus every knee should bend*.

That's what today's celebration means, I'd say; and is a foundational truth for every day.