

Nov 25 Christ the King (Sunday before Advent)

READINGS: Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20 Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46

Sermon A

The notice above Jesus' cross proclaimed, 'This is the King of the Jews' Herod, who was supposed to be the 'king of the Jews' and Pilate, who served the Roman emperor, wanted to mock this man who had none of the trappings of kingship. But Jesus is a different sort of king, who uses his power not to oppress or control but to liberate and redeem. His concern is not to protect what he has, but to 'save others', even at the cost of his own life. The world had never before seen a man who would pray for the forgiveness of his enemies even as they tortured and killed him – "Forgive them, Father. They don't know what they are doing." This is truly the King of Love. One of the criminals crucified with Jesus shows some key characteristics of those who would belong to God's kingdom. He acknowledges his guilt – "Our sentence...is only right, because we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong." He recognises that Jesus is a King, despite all the seeming evidence to the contrary, and asks to be remembered when he begins his reign – "Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King." He models the repentance and faith we all need.

Turning to our reading from Paul's letter to the Colossian Christians, we find Paul describing 'the kingdom of the God's dear Son' as a 'kingdom of light', and his emphasis is on God's action in allowing us entry. God has 'qualified us', when we could not hope to qualify ourselves; he has 'rescued us' from a pit we could not climb out of; and he has 'brought us' into his kingdom: like an asylum seeker entering a new country, we live under new authority. Set free from the past, with all our wrongdoings forgiven, we certainly have every incentive to 'joyfully give thanks to the Father.'

In our reading from Jeremiah, Jesus is called 'The LORD Our Salvation', a king who rules wisely, a king who does what is right and just, a king who brings us salvation and peace. And as Psalm 46, today's Praise Shout, reminds us, one day he will destroy the weapons of war and make all wars to cease as he is exalted among the nations, supreme over the world.

Our privilege is to bow the knee to him now, although he is despised by the world, and to start living now by his values of justice and love even before his kingdom comes in all its fullness.

SERMON B

Perhaps some of you can remember the childhood chant: “I’m the king of the castle and you’re the dirty wee rascal”, never meaning it of course. Then there was the guy that had all the girls swooning and screaming, although I could never see what my sister saw in him or his songs – I’m talking, of course, about ‘the King’, otherwise known as Elvis. Then there were the movies – *King Kong, the Lion King, Return of the King* (part of the Lord of the Rings cycle). All of which goes to show how many different meanings we put on the word ‘king’ and what the word ‘king’ is being used to suggest in each of these cases. You could do the same with other usages of the word ‘king’ you come up with.

But what is a king and what does a king do? Most people now live in countries where a king or queen doesn’t have any real power. They certainly don’t command the same kind of awe, reverence and fear that a king would have done in Jesus’ time.

It’s hard for us to imagine just how provocative it was to be called ‘king’ in Jesus’ time and what expectations people around Jesus would have had of someone who called themselves a king. Take King Herod – the Great, that is (there are 3 Herods mentioned in the Bible) – the brutal and ruthless despot, who stopped at nothing to make sure any rival to his throne was eliminated and who had John the Baptist beheaded – the Herod dynasty knew what they expected a king to do. Pilate expected King Herod to arbitrate in local religious disputes so that he could wash his hands of the Jesus question and wriggle out of his responsibilities. The Jews expected a warrior king who would drive out the Roman forces occupying their land. So you can begin to imagine the fear or uncertainty that a new person calling themselves a ‘king’ would create in a land under foreign rule, largely based around understandings of ‘king’ which involved violence and war-leadership – particularly among the people who thought they should be in charge!

We Christians call Jesus a ‘king’, but we do this knowing that he is radically different from every other ‘king’ – he’s not strong and violent like King Kong, he’s not a fragile, idolised pop-star like Elvis, he’s not a warrior as in *Return of the King*.

He moved into our neighbourhood and lived among us. He came, not to be served, but to serve, kneeling at the feet of his friends and washing their feet. He lived a hard, travelling life, sometimes hiding from those in authority. He suffered and died on the cross. God’s suffering-Servant anointed King.

And his 'kingdom', too, is different. Both our New Testament readings today make it clear that everyone and anyone can be a part of it, if, when Jesus says 'Follow me', they do. Even someone as wise and as devoted as Paul is not part of the kingdom of God by his own efforts – he counts himself among those whom God has 'rescued' and 'brought in'. Even the thief on the cross – about to die, and with no opportunity to do anything at all in the few remaining hours of his life – is welcomed into the kingdom. And in what other kingdom do you find the king serving his subjects? Paul's statement that 'all beings in heaven and on earth', indeed 'the whole universe', will be brought back to God by Jesus' love and sacrifice suggests that we can look forward to a time when there will be no doubt about Jesus' glory and power and authority. This is part of what we mean when we pray, 'your kingdom come'. We who trust in him extol Jesus as our king now, but the full glory of his kingdom has yet to come. One last thought: our aim as Christians should be to use every opportunity we have (in worship, in prayer or song, in talking to others about Jesus) to celebrate Jesus' extra special and radically different 'kingship' and praise him for it.