

Sermon 20.11.22 (Christ the King)

Jeremiah 23.1–6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1.11–20; Luke 23.33–43

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King – and there is something jarring about this title.

One jarring aspect of this title is how it is used in the reading from Luke's Gospel that we just heard. Here it is intended not to praise but to mock, not to acknowledge Jesus' authority but to ridicule his failure. Luke records that scribed into a panel above his head on the cross were the words 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. In Matthew's Gospel we read how Christ was robed in purple and crown of thorns. To his Roman torturers, the contrast not just with his broken and filthy body but also with his explicit rejection by the Jewish authorities was laughable.

And then, on top of this, it seems so inconsistent with what makes Christian theology so remarkable. A God who empties himself, who humbles himself to take on human form, to become a minister to prostitutes and tax collectors, a wandering preacher and healer, a victim of humiliation and torture and execution – this is the remarkable God of Christianity, for whom 'King' seems the least appropriate, least dignified of titles. What, after all, does his story have to do with the men who wielded violent, worldly power over human states for so much of our history?

I want to spend this sermon asking what this strange image of a broken, tortured, divine king might promise for our difficult, human world.

Christ the King is one of the more recent feast days in the church's calendar. It's history goes back only as far as the 1920s, to an encyclical, in other words, a formal letter, of Pope Pius XI.

This date, and this pope, are important clues as to how we should come to understand the significance of Christ's kingship. This is not a pope dedicated to a muscular account of the church militant, to an

authoritarian institution dominating secular politics with disregard to the world around it.

In fact, it's quite the opposite. Pius XI, who was pope throughout the 1920s and 1930s, was distinguished by his concern for the poor and the vulnerable. Throughout his pontificate, he was an insistent voice, albeit an unsuccessful one, against antisemitism, against fascism in Germany and Italy and Austria, and against racism in the USA.

And yet it was he who would take this ancient title for Jesus and make it a cornerstone of his preaching, his encyclicals and, eventually, the church's calendar.

So why did this pope, so committed to the poor and the persecuted, choose to emphasise kingship? The reason is its historical context. In the 1920s, Europe was still suffering deeply from the violence and destruction of the First World War, from the threat of nationalism and revolution, from class division and poverty.

For Pius, the most distinctive aspect of this crisis was division, a disunity that threatened to erupt again in war and violence as people, including many Christians, joined one group and sought to persecute another.

Above all, he believed, this was a false tribalism that subverted the true unity of human beings in Jesus, the unity that came from belonging to a single kingdom and to a single king. He fixed this feast to the last Sunday of the Liturgical year, just on the eve of Advent, as if to say that this how the many mysteries of the religious year are finally made one.

And this contrast between division under secular kings and unity under one divine king – has a very long history in Biblical thought. Indeed, it is characteristic of the world of Jeremiah, which we also heard about this morning. The reading began with the Lord saying: “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!”

These shepherds are the last, corrupt kings who ruled ancient Judah before their kingdom was invaded by the Babylonians and its inhabitants were scattered.

The promise the Lord makes through Jeremiah is to return and to lead his divided people back to the pasture: a model of recovered unity.

The Lord says: 'I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing'.

But the passage continues, to promise a branch from the stock of Jesse, the father of King David, that Christians have long identified as being Christ himself. And this branch will be 'a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land'. This promised good king is also promise of unity with justice and safety.

This is a model not of kingship as wealth and domination, not of thrones and crowns and authoritarian diktat, but of humanity finally attaining its potential to live in love and peace.

But what changed as Christians, Pope Pius XI among them, reread passages like this in the wake of Christ's resurrection, was that the image of a final, perfect living in peace and justice became not just a distant promise but also a present reality – even in a world still beset by violence and pain.

There are many references to the Kingdom of God in the Gospels and they are much too varied for me to attempt to summarise them. But one thing that unites them is a belief that the kingdom of God has already begun – that the wise shepherd has already returned and his kingdom is already being unified. So we might ask – where is this kingdom of unity, how does it work, what can we do to further it?

When Pius described the Kingdom of Christ, he did so in response to a social and political disaster and I think he imagined it as offering a social and political solution. But if you read the text of his letter, called *Quas primas* 'In the first', it is concerned overwhelmingly with the reign of Christ in our hearts.

He offers not proposals for a new constitution or for one political party over another, but for the responsibility that all of us have for fostering the reign of Christ in our own lives, and not only in our hearts, Pius writes

but also in our wills, and in our bodies and members. I include these to show how encompassing, how demanding Pius' instruction was – he really does list hearts, minds, wills, bodies and limbs.

But this is not a domestic or narrow vision. It is a specific and impassioned plea for a generous politics of unity and love, a rejection of racism, fascism, nationalism, tribalism, antisemitism. If this kingdom begins in our hearts, it is not intended to stay there; because it transforms the will and body and heart of the individual, it will transform their social and political actions too.

To end my sermon, I want to return to the Gospel reading we heard today for a model of kingship that epitomises not dominance and power but a relentless commitment to compassion and forgiveness in the face of violence and division.

Luke's version of the crucifixion differs in a few, small ways from the accounts in Mark and Matthew. I want to focus on two of the most important. Perhaps the most significant are the words said by Jesus in verse 34, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." No other Gospel includes these words.

And there is another saying of Jesus that is found in Luke but in no other Gospel. One of the two criminals crucified with him repents, he turns to Jesus and says 'Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom'. And Jesus says to him 'today you will be with me in Paradise.'

It is an emphasis that is so typical of the Jesus of Luke's Gospel, concerned to the end with the ignorant or outcast, and with forgiveness.

This, then, is the image of Christian kingship – a broken man, asking forgiveness for his persecutors, promising a united kingdom in which the political enemy and the repentant criminal are also welcome.

Amen.