

## Sermon – Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2018 – 9.30 am

I wonder if this is an experience you can relate to. I was working at home one afternoon, the telephone rang, and I answered with a rather sharp, “Hello”, and at the other end of the line I could hear the surprise and slight concern of my lovely cousin, who had come over from New Zealand, was due to arrive with his wife the following day, and just wanted to check that everything was still ok with me.

The thing is, I had just that moment come off the phone to BT who were apparently calling me because they wanted to find out whether I was enjoying my BT service. The call had opened with that cheery, “Hello Theresa, how are you?” Which I’m afraid tends to set me off all wrong, because my sense is that they really aren’t particularly interested in how I am. And then began the questions about my overall satisfaction - to which I could only really say, “well, it’s a phone line and broadband which usually functions and it doesn’t quite fail enough for me to complain.” I’m not sure how gushing people generally are when asked about their BT service, but I felt like a bit more was expected of me – that I wasn’t really prepared to give. And inside I was feeling decidedly grumpy at yet another nuisance telephone call.

And so when my cousin called, my hackles were already up, and my response decidedly frosty. And it was only his clear confusion at my attitude that brought me up short, realising that somehow I had allowed the ways of the world we live in to affect my attitude towards individuals.

It strikes me that at every level we can find ourselves feeling as though we are constrained by the world we live in. I remember when Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the opposition, suggesting that he would change politics. That, for example, Prime Minister’s Questions would be less adversarial. And when I watch the goings-on in parliament it seems that very little has changed. That somehow the resolve of one person wasn’t enough to lead to a culture shift in such a historic institution – whether or not such change was desirable.

When we celebrate Christ the King, we are compelled to consider the challenges of living according to the values of God’s kingdom. We are challenged to ask ourselves whether we recognise the reign of Christ in our lives, or whether we are controlled by other values.

Our gospel reading propels us to the trial of Jesus. Can you see just how extraordinary this is? In human terms, the idea of a King on trial is already a failure. But that is exactly the point. In Jesus the very idea of Kingship is transformed.

Just consider his life so far. John’s gospel is perhaps the clearest about the divine identity of Jesus right from the beginning. Yet he soon challenges expectations. The first miracle, turning water into wine, shows the abundance in God’s kingdom, the gracious generosity, the outpouring of love that cannot be quelled or diminished.

And the challenges continue, showing us what the kingdom of God looks like – overturning the tables in the Temple; spending time with those on the margins of society; forgiving sins and challenging those who fail to do so. The Kingship of Jesus is that of the Good Shepherd, prepared to lay down his life for the sheep. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a lowly donkey and on the night before he dies he kneels before his disciples and washes their feet. This is the antithesis of what we imagine when we think of a king.

One of the striking things about the scene that is played out in today's gospel reading is the way in which each character plays their part. Jesus is brought before Pilate by the Jewish leaders. If Jesus is to be put to death, it must be for a political crime, not a religious one. Pilate should be calling the shots – just think about how legal systems are set up. A courtroom places the judge on high and requires everyone to stand when they enter the room. We know who is in control, who makes the decisions.

Not so here. Pilate begins by asking Jesus if he is the King of the Jews, but Jesus answers with a question – is Pilate asking for himself, or because others told him? Jesus knows that Pilate does not want to be in this position and that he is on unstable ground – the charges against Jesus aren't well-founded. More than this, though, Jesus answers to a higher authority. Pilate may have status and responsibilities as Roman governor, but Jesus belongs to a different kind of kingdom and ultimately answers only to God.

The conversation is almost like a game of chess, with each making their move. But what distinguishes the two players is their motivations. Pilate doesn't want to be here. This is a Jewish problem, and he wants the Jewish leaders to deal with it. Yet as soon as there is any suggestion of Jesus claiming kingship he is concerned – what would the Emperor think if Pilate allowed anyone to challenge the Emperor's power? Kingship belongs to the Emperor alone. And while Pilate's concerns are for his own status, Jesus remains faithful. His power is not of this world, and if the consequence is that he must be put to death by the authorities here on earth, it is a price he will pay to remain faithful to God.

How often, I wonder, when we watch the machinations and manoeuvrings of our own politicians do we have a real sense that they recognise a good beyond their own position? Of course it can be all too easy to criticise those we do not know personally, and I am not trying to suggest that we don't have many faithful public servants. But our motivations matter. It can be so easy to feel defeated by the way the world is; to feel that there are forces beyond our control that we can't change.

But change begins with us. Just think, for example, of Tracey Crouch, who resigned as Minister for Sport because she simply could not agree with a delay in reducing the maximum stake in fixed odds betting terminals. Her own position mattered less than the principle for which she stood.

Recognising the Kingship of Christ begins with each one of us. While there may be many things about the world that frustrate us, there are also always signs of where God is at work. Following Christ means finding those signs and being a part of that Kingdom. Finding the places where the hungry are being fed; where injustice is being challenged; where individuals are being valued for who they are; where love is being graciously given.

There will always be opposing forces, and they will often seem attractive. But they are existence, not life. True life is found where there is truth. Where we can look one another directly in the eye and know that our motivations are founded in the values of God's kingdom.

We won't always get it right and truth is always best discerned together. But hope lies in knowing that where Christ reigns there is abundance of life for all.

Amen