

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 21st November 2021
Sunday next before Advent - Christ the King

Collect

God the Father,
help us to hear the call of Christ the King
and to follow in his service,
whose kingdom has no end;
for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, one glory.

Amen.

Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds;

 every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
 and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’ Pilate replied, ‘I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?’ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’ Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘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.’

Sermon

By now you will probably have come to understand that I love the church year. Whenever Brian reminds me that it is time for the curtains and altar frontals to be changed, as we enter the next season of the church year, I get a little excited about the prospect of engaging once again with the next part of the story of God. The thing is, as we enter each season, we hold together both familiarity and newness. We have been here before, yet our experience will always be different, and so we have an opportunity to grow in our faith.

Yet on the feast of Christ the King I find myself faced with something of a conundrum. There are perhaps two images above any other that I have in my mind when I think of Christ the King. The first is of Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the last supper. That extraordinary act of humility and service that we remember every year on Maundy Thursday. And the second is the crown of thorns. The crown given in scorn to Jesus before he was crucified.

Both of these images should shock us. They should, quite literally, turn our worlds upside down. And yet, because each one forms part of the story that we tell and re-tell year by year, they have somehow become just a little bit too familiar.

But this morning I want us to connect with that sense of shock. Because the message of Christ the King is a message of our expectations turned upside down.

I have a great respect for Her Majesty the Queen, not least because she is so clearly a woman of deep faith. The shock of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is akin to the shock we would experience if the Queen held a formal dinner and decided to serve the food. It just wouldn't happen. In 21st century Britain it is perhaps harder than ever to connect with such an overturning of expectations. If we think about the younger members of the royal family, they are used to getting their hands dirty; getting stuck in. The Middle East of the first century wasn't like that. It was deferential. Honour and shame played a significant role in the culture. And for a leader to wash feet would have been seen as shameful. It really was a big deal. Which is why, as we hear in this morning's gospel reading, it is as though Jesus and Pilate are speaking different languages. Jesus may indeed be a King – though it is not how he chooses to define himself. But his understanding of Kingship is so radically different from Pilate's that the conversation shows two people talking past each other.

So how, I wonder, might we connect today with the radical message of Christ the King? A couple of relatively insignificant experiences over the last couple of weeks have got me thinking in a slightly different way.

The first was as I stood in Starbucks (other coffee shops are available) waiting for my drink and watched a Deliveroo rider arrive to pick up an order, place it in his big insulated backpack, and take it to whoever had placed the order. And the second was when I heard an innocuous comment about how worthwhile it was to pay a little extra money to beat the queue at a theme park.

These experiences started a train of thought about what it is, in the modern world, that we will spend extra money on. Or perhaps pay a premium for. And what it is that we expect in return. Because somehow this begins to show where we place value.

It strikes me that convenience is highly prized. I think that can be what lies behind some types of home deliveries; paying to avoid queuing. It's hardly surprising. We live busy lives, often trying to fit in just a little bit more than there is time for in any 24 hour day. In most families both parents work, as well as the children being involved in any number of activities. In daily life, it makes sense to pay for something to be delivered – or even pay a little more for it to be delivered sooner – to avoid yet another call on our time. And with only limited time available to enjoy at the weekends, why would we not spend it enjoying ourselves, rather than in queues?

At the more expensive end of the spectrum it is probably also fair to say that people are prepared to pay for a sense of exclusivity. I just love the way that if you travel First Class, you also get a separate lounge at the airport – and I'm desperate to know what the First Class lounge is actually like. Of course, whether it's first class travel, or membership of exclusive clubs, there can be perfectly valid reasons for these things. Anyone travelling with work would do anything for more comfortable travel in order to arrive in a fit state to get on with the job.

To be clear, what I am not trying to do is to criticise people for getting home deliveries, paying to avoid queues or travelling first class. There are plenty of perfectly valid reasons to do all of these things. More than that, though, the feast of Christ the King is not about criticising kingship. Steeped in the Old Testament as he was, Jesus knew that there were good kings and bad kings. Yet he used something that people understood in order to transform their thinking.

What I'm starting to wonder is whether understanding the message of Christ the King for us today is likewise about transforming our understanding of what is worthwhile. If Jesus overturned the understanding of Kingship, so that it no longer looked like a person of status and wealth, wearing fine clothes and sitting at the head of the table, but rather like a man tying a towel around his waist and washing his disciples' feet... Well, where is it that we might find Jesus today?

So here's my starter for ten. I wonder whether we might find Jesus choosing to stand in a queue and talk to people. Even if it took longer than he expected. I wonder whether we might find Jesus being constantly interrupted during his day – by people of all sorts, asking him questions, engaging him in conversation, wondering what he was doing and what he thought.

And I wonder whether the places that we see Jesus today are those that defy our expectations – and especially those of convenience and exclusivity. There are so many examples. Every time someone takes a little extra time at the supermarket to choose some items for the Foodbank – or delivers items to a collection point, even if it's a little inconvenient. Every time someone sorts their waste into different containers for recycling; takes the extra time to walk or cycle somewhere in order to protect the environment, even if they have to arrange their day around it. Every time someone chooses to give someone a lift; volunteer their time; stop and chat to a neighbour rather than rushing on to the next thing.

And the reason that I know these are signs of the Kingdom – signs of the reign of Christ the King – is because they are the moments that transform lives. Not just the lives of the recipient, but the lives of those who put themselves out. You will know as well as I do that whenever you take the time and effort to give, you receive back in abundance. That is the nature of God's Kingdom. That is what we are committing ourselves to when we celebrate Christ the King.

Amen