

Sermon – Sunday 24th November 2019 – 9.30 am

Today, as well as celebrating Rosie's baptism, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. So it's probably important to think about our understanding of Kingship. When I say the word "King", I wonder what words or images spring to mind? If you're a visual person, perhaps you are picturing someone wearing a crown or royal robes. Maybe you're seeing Henry VIII in his finery. Perhaps we think about Kings as powerful. Think of the words we use in our own National Anthem – victorious, happy, glorious.

We should probably dig a little deeper, though. The advent of democracy has meant that often our understanding of Kingship can feel rather detached from our daily lives – the leadership of our nation is not really in the hands of the monarchy any more. And if I ask you what kind of qualities you would like to see in our nation's leaders, you would undoubtedly come up with a subtler picture. I wonder what would be at the top of your list? Fairness, justice, compassion, courage. I'm told that for the younger generations, integrity is something they especially hope for.

Whether we have in mind the stereotypical image of a king, or consider leadership qualities more carefully, what we probably don't end up with is the image we are offered in this morning's Gospel reading. This is the scene of Jesus's death, and probably none of us, when we imagine the qualities we would hope for in a leader, envisage them being crucified alongside two criminals. It is a scene of weakness, failure and desolation. Indeed, not only is Jesus facing a horrific end, but he is scorned and mocked by those around him – leaders, soldiers, and even the criminals.

So why do we have this reading for the feast of Christ the King? What can we possibly learn here about leadership – and indeed what it means to follow?

Part of the point of Christ the King is to overturn our understanding of Kingship. If we want our Kings to be swashbuckling heroes, we are challenged to reconsider. If we see leadership as a position of strength, authority and control, we are invited to re-think. As much as anything, we are invited to look at the example of Jesus and ask ourselves what it has to tell us about leadership.

Many of the congregation have seen a resource that I have called, "The Christ we Share". It contains 30 images of Jesus, drawings, paintings and sculptures from different periods of history depicting different understandings of Christ. I often use the images with people who are preparing for confirmation. Here in the UK, it is surprising how drawn we are to the traditional image of Jesus as a man in a white robe with fair hair, often surrounded by animals. Gentle Jesus meek and mild, we might say. And the images of pain, anguish and most especially anger are generally unpopular.

But here's the thing. Jesus challenges our expectations. If we are to follow Jesus, we need to expect to have to ask ourselves really searching questions. And today it's searching questions about leadership.

Let's return to the scene of crucifixion and focus in on Jesus. There are two things that Jesus says from the cross. The first is, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." The leadership of Christ is all about forgiveness. It's crucial really. And perhaps it is a particular challenge to us in an age where we are always desperate to find someone to blame for almost everything. But what Jesus knows is that true leadership requires an understanding of forgiveness. Because Jesus knows that we make mistakes and that we need to be able to move on from them.

Let's be clear, I'm not trying to suggest that Jesus expected us to have superhuman powers to forgive in the face of desperate circumstances. Elsewhere in the Gospels he is quite clear about the need for repentance – for turning away from our wrongdoing in meaningful ways.

But here we are talking not only about our own capacity to forgive, but about God's. Which takes us to the second utterance of Jesus, said to one of the criminals being crucified alongside him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Words of hope and of love. And also words of truth. Throughout this final scene of Jesus's life we realise that he sees things more clearly than we do. We also see that those around him *can* see more clearly if they choose to do so. While there are those who follow the crowd and join in the mocking and jeering, one of the criminal dares to utter what everyone knows deep down. That Jesus has been unjustly convicted. That while they are being punished for offences they have committed, he is not.

The question of truth is such a live one at the moment. I think most commentators recognise that one of the most fundamental things lacking in our political world at the moment is trust. But just as trust is not something gained overnight, so our search for truth is a lifelong venture.

In his commentary on Matthew's gospel, Stanley Hauerwas invites his readers to consider the difference between being a follower of Christ and being an admirer. Do we read the gospels in a slightly detached way, recognising the goodness in Jesus, that he "did the right thing", but largely distancing ourselves. He's someone to look up to, but we all know that what he preached just doesn't really work in our daily lives.

Or are we followers? Are we prepared to throw in our lot with Jesus. To learn from him and shape our lives around his teaching.

The feast of Christ the King is probably more about being followers than it is about leadership. Jesus definitely overturns our understanding of leadership – and that is no bad thing. But today, as we baptise Rosie, we take time to remind ourselves what it means to be followers. And who it is that we are following.

Today is the start of Rosie's journey, and each one of us is at a different place on our own journey. Some of us will recognise times when we have tended to be more admirers than followers. Some of us will also be able to see times we have gone completely off track. Sometimes it can be pretty hard to see where the track actually is.

Jesus knows all of that. He knows what it is to be human. To make mistakes. To take wrong turnings. To get lost and confused. And he knows the power of love, hope and forgiveness. Our commitment to Rosie is to be alongside her as she journeys and to show her the love, hope and forgiveness of the one we seek to follow.

Amen