

Sermon Feast of Christ the King 2021

On this beautiful feast of Christ the King, we come now to the end of our liturgical year. Next week, with the start of Advent, we commence a new church year. But as we come to today's festival, we are brought face to face with some of the more strident *political claims* of the gospel. And this is somewhat unavoidable as the images and language attached to this feast are unavoidably political: language of kings and kingdoms, of reigning and of thrones, of power, rule and authority. Now, for some this language unnerves and unsettles because it seems so dissonant with our egalitarian, democratic values. We risk dismissing it because we deem it too archaic or irrelevant. But we cannot ignore the language of scripture just because it doesn't fit with our values! We must work at incorporating them and making sense of them. In speaking of the things of God, we only have the language of man. And we must trust that the language and images God has chosen to reveal himself, *actually do* reveal something of his own eternal truth. In other words, how God has revealed himself – including in the language and images of this feast – shows us something of how God *actually is*. There isn't some 'other' God that is distinct from God's own self-disclosure to us.

Now some might assert that the church has no business in being political. And in some regards, this is correct, in the sense that the church makes a grave misstep in seeking to be *party* political. And makes an even graver misstep in aligning with a certain political *system*. But a further error is made when the assertion extends to, *the church ought to be 'neutral'*. But this tends to be an argument that the church, and those who represent it, ought to really just shut up and keep their noses out of public affairs. But there is nothing neutral about the gospel of Jesus Christ! The gospel makes total and absolute claims for Jesus Christ! Which means the whole of our lives, (including our public lives), and not just conveniently carved off parts, must submit to Christ.

And this is brought home most powerfully by the most basic and most essential of all Christian creeds: *Jesus is Lord*. These three words not only summarise the whole of Christian faith, but *is* at the same time make a bold political assertion. In the Roman world of the first century there was another who claimed absolute lordship, namely the emperor. The New Testament writers are very intentional and, it must be said, political, in claiming lordship for Jesus. Which begs the question how, then, do we relate to the world around? How do we relate to its political orderings? Thankfully, the Gospel today helps answer this. In a word, by being *out of step* with it.

Look at the key image that is presented to us in the gospel today. We have presented to us from John's Gospel an incredibly striking visual of two men who could barely be more different. We are presented with what is perhaps the greatest face off in all of Scripture! We see Pilate, the man of violence. The four gospels and other historians from the first century, namely Josephus and Philo, all bear witness to Pilate's heavy-handed rule. According to Josephus, Pilate was *dismissed* from office because he violently suppressed an armed Samaritan movement. And that on top a well-established history of responding to tensions by violence. He was sent back to Rome to answer before the emperor. Even his bloodlust was too much for the Romans who made a sport of blood lust! In contrast Jesus, the man of peace, the prince of peace, who lays down his life for his friends.

We see Pilate, the man of prestige and power, from the very centre of power. Born into privilege into a well-known Roman Plebian family, and a member of the equestrian order which made him part of middle nobility. And Jesus, born in a lowly stable, the poor carpenter of Nazareth, the Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head, who even in death must borrow a tomb. We see Pilate representing the greatest ruler on earth - Tiberius Caesar Augustus - of the most powerful empire on earth. And Jesus, representing a kingdom not of this world, representing the great of king of heaven.

As readers of the gospel, we know who we should be backing in this story. As people of faith, we know whose side we should be on! And yet, and yet, the temptation to the power as represented by Pilate remains in the church so incredibly resilient. Even as we look upon our Lord in this scene, we look at Pilate and might say, *I want what he's having...* And so, to help orient us back to Christ's vision we are reminded simply his *kingdom is not of this world*.

Christians must inhabit this world. We must find a way to accommodate our public civic, communal lives in the light of our faith. We are not spiritual beings, we are embodied beings. Further, according to God's good order, we are created social beings which means created as political beings. We must learn to live in this world even as we set out hope and sights on the next. We make sense of our political, public and civic lives by accepting that our temporal end must be subordinated to our eternal end. In other words, for Christians the ordering of our lives is not determined by living on the horizontal plane. Our lives are to be ordered according to the vertical. That, and only that is where we can make sense of our place in the world.

As Christians, our simple mission is true worship of the true God, and the salvation of souls. It's as simple and as difficult as that! We work so that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend" and "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord". How do we see to it that as many souls go to Heaven as possible? Well, the formula hasn't changed. It's the same way the first Christians did. We must preach the Gospel. We have to perform Works of Mercy. We have to commit ourselves to a regimen of prayer and penance, begging God for the grace to help Him win souls. But in order to achieve that sort of spiritual fitness, we need communities that nurture us spiritually. Now, the days of striding into the public square with all guns blazing (so to speak) are probably over for us. We've suffered too many losses to keep fighting the enemy head-on. We need to build up mountain strongholds where we can train our fighters (fellow Christians) before they're strong enough to bear arms (evangelize).

Of course, we should do what we can to enlist the government's help. But that's the most it can do: help. The state cannot fight the Church's battles for her. That's our job. C.S. Lewis once more helps make sense of all this: *Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.* What could be a more compelling disguise than the Man of Sorrows, stripped, beaten, standing before Pilate? Nothing could be more out of step with conventional understandings of power and influence than this disguise of Christ our king! But that's our place: out of step. We are not called to be either activists or separatists. We're called to be saboteurs, partisans, revolutionaries! This means we can stop trying to be the liberator, the saviour, trying to fix all the world's problems. We leave all of that to God, and instead focus on being icons, ambassadors, for the God's kingdom. If Christians lived as Christian, the world *would be* a different place!

Our mission - to worship God and save souls - is worth recalling as we observe our AGM today. Because it is *a communal* mission. We cannot fulfill it ourselves. And this takes the pressure of us, as individuals. It means we can quietly go about our own humble work in our own spheres, our own little vineyards. But it highlights the importance of the church community, that it truly be the place of nurture and encouragement; that it truly strengthen for mission; that it be the place to come to for rest and refreshment. And then sent out from it, as Lewis says, to *take part in a great campaign of sabotage.*

Our mass today concludes with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. And in this exquisite act of worship, we are invited to fall to our knees in silent adoration. This reminds us that it is indeed on our knees that we most helpfully fight for Christ our King. It is on our knees we do battle for him. On our knees that we disarm ourselves, abandon our agendas to rule, and instead let Christ instead direct us. It is a sure truth that if Christ is not lord of our lives and of hearts, then something else will be. Nothing corrects our stubborn wills, or reorients us better, or shows where our true allegiance lay, then this gesture of humility. Nothing could be more out of step than to fall to one's knees in worship before Christ our King. Amen.