

Sermon Feast of Christ the King Year B 2024

Well, after 10 weeks away I feel somewhat rusty ascending this pulpit and daring to preach again! Yes, I am feeling more than a little jet lagged. And I'm hoping that the sheer effort of getting back here won't undo all the good from my time away. And it has been good! And there will be other opportunities to share some of what I have experienced in more detail later. You may be hoping that today you get a summary of my adventures. But I will not make you suffer that self-indulgence... Of course, one of the blessings of travel is that we are exposed to different ways of living, different ways of looking at the world. We are reminded that not everyone experiences or understands the world as we do. What can appear very strange and peculiar to us, to others is completely natural and normal. In different settings some customs and cultural habits might appear to us quite quaint and even anachronistic.

Today we crown the church's year and celebrate the feast of Christ the King. And this too brings us face to face with something anachronistic. The idea of Christ who is King seems to come from another age, another world, one which at best is remote from us. And in some sense, it *does* come from another age and another world; from an age when nearly all the world was ruled by kings and when you were more likely to consider yourself a 'subject' rather than a 'citizen'. We might yet still have a 'King of Australia', but a constitutional monarchy is also incredibly remote from the concepts of kingship that applied to the ancient world.

But even if the concept sits somewhat uneasily in our context, the image of Christ the King has always been part of Christian faith. Indeed, the very title, 'Lord' reflects this. It indicates the unique claims Jesus makes on his followers. What's more, the title 'Lord' is part of the divine revelation. It appears widely in the New Testament as one of the earliest ways of understanding who Christ is. And so it cannot be easily dismissed. So, while the world around us has largely moved away from the images and concepts of kingly rule, the church – faithful to the New Testament witness - proposes this way of understanding Christ as something that might still speak to us today.

Celebrating Christ as King is not something some well-meaning but misguided church officials have dreamt up to keep the poor, unsuspecting faithful in their place! If we take our scriptures seriously, then we must take the image of Christ as King seriously. But as always, the way the image works in relation to Christ undercuts and reinterprets the ways in which we might normally approach the image. As Christ himself says in the Gospel today, *my kingdom is not of this world*.

One way Christ as King stretches conventional ideas about kingship is by seeing it placed alongside the alternative. The gospel today provides us with the archetypal example: Christ before Pilate. It is a clever play of contrasts. Pilate stands as the flawed, violent, oppressive model of worldly rule. Time and again we see earthly rulers who try to assume this model of dominance, violence and control all come unstuck. We see Pilate's struggle to get his mind around what kind of kingship Christ might represent, with Jesus insisting, *Yes, I am a king*. Above Jesus' head on the Cross Pilate will have pinned the words, *'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'*. It is unlikely that Pilate appreciated the irony. In Pilate's mind a king is one who seeks to hold territory, to fight wars, to sit amongst the great and powerful. For Christ it is *to bear witness to the truth*. In the verse immediately following what we hear today, Pilate simply asks, *'What is truth?'* We can imagine him shrugging his shoulders, ending the conversation, and ending Christ's life, because it's all too hard, and he just doesn't get it. The contrast is complete.

At the conclusion of mass today we might also show how *we* understand Christ's kingship. As we kneel before Him in adoration, and through Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, we see a wonderful example of how Christ's kingship functions, and what this means for those who swear allegiance to him. It is important to remember that the very sacrament of the Eucharist itself reveals something of Christ's kingship. Christ as Lord and Ruler of the universe comes to us in the lowly form of bread. He exercises his authority in supreme humility. He becomes so low, so humble we might not even recognise him. And many (even sincere, faithful Christians) won't. Or refuse to accept this form of Christ's presence, this exercise of his divine right.

But for those who have eyes to see, and after the pattern and example of Christ the Humble One, we humble ourselves and kneel before him. Now, this is an affront to Contemporary Man. Contemporary Man sees kneeling as humiliation. As something beneath him. As something unworthy of him. Contemporary Man wants us to stand upright. He wants us to look face to face, eye to eye. Contemporary Man parades under the banner of equality. He is suspicious of hierarchy. And though he claims to celebrate diversity and inclusion, what he really wants is a bland sameness. Contemporary Man resists kneeling. He will find excuses not to. Contemporary Man refuses to be subject to any one or anything, but thereby creates a prison for himself.

In the faith catholic, however, our postures reveal what we believe. And so, in this simple gesture, we show that we believe Christ truly present. We show he is worthy of our adoration. We show that he is worthy of our allegiance. And to *not*, is to miss what Christ proposes in his kingship. Christ never exercises his authority to dominate, to control, much less to humiliate. And by a wonderful mystery – and again showing how Christ’s kingly rule subverts usual understandings – we kneel before him *only to be raised up!*

Kneeling is not a sign of our grovelling unworthiness or our humiliation. On the contrary. Saint Paul reminds the church in Rome that we have the dignity of being children of God *and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...* Those who swear allegiance to Christ are not kept low, and not manipulated or controlled. *But made coheirs.* Our posture of kneeling before Christ reveals our very dignity. Of course, if by reason of age or frailty we cannot physically enact this, then the same can be shown in the disposition of our hearts, in our minds and in our lives. Our hearts and minds turn and bow low before him.

Following our service today, we also have our AGM. It is an opportunity to see how we have been faithful subjects. And an opportunity to see how we can better build *Christ's* kingdom. Christian faith teaches us – as does our worship today - that allegiance to Christ, rather than diminishing us, raises us to our full dignity. Allowing Christ to rule in us brings us to share in his majesty.

Our celebration today then is not anachronistic. Understanding Christ as king is not something we should be embarrassed about or distance ourselves from. It reminds us that being his subject is the sure path to truth, freedom and life. Amen.