

Christ the King, Last Sunday after Pentecost [34]

Luke 23:33-43

So here we are at the end of another Christian year. We've faced a rollercoaster as always, of the expectation of Advent, the hope of Christmas, the disappointment of Good Friday, the joy of Easter, gratitude for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the renewal of the Church's mission. It's very easy to quickly pass over the end of the year, in the old days it was just called the Sunday before advent but today's title in the lectionary is the Sunday of Christ the King. It is an attempt to more clearly mark the end of one Christian year and beginning another. Let us take the opportunity of exploring this notion of Christ the King and what it means to the Church and to us.

The dictionary has lots of entries against the word King but essentially it means sovereign, to be a king is to govern or control a place and its people. In the Old Testament Samuel warns the Israelites against appointing a king to govern them. He believed that a king would enlist the men in an army; enlist the people in an economy for the king's benefit that leads to poverty and greed for non-kings; enlist the women as property, gifts for the pleasure of the privileged; enlist the work of the worker's hands for the propertied; enlist the product of time and energy spent and claim the right of taxation without representation; and this will call forth much weeping when folks find out what their desire for a king has wrought in their lives.

With a few adjustments this is very similar to the role of a monarch throughout history. They head the army, live in a very nice style paid for by taxpayers and there are many who feel that this is unfair. And it is not surprising that Jesus was not recognised by many as the messiah if this is what the Jewish people were expecting.

It seems likely that the Jewish people thought that the messiah would arrive with an army of angels and fight the Romans by playing them at their own game. They expected Jesus to be a strong, motivational leader who would easily recruit men to perform an uprising against their oppressors. But Jesus is not a warrior king.

In Jesus' time the leaders and rulers of the land would avoid contact with the poorer members of society and the sick, showing little respect for anyone who was not useful to their purposes and ambitions. People were appalled by Jesus' acts of love, compassion and respect towards all he met, especially the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden. But Jesus isn't a selfish, power hungry king.

In the Gospel accounts of his death we are told that Jesus was taunted by rulers, soldiers and all the other onlookers. They tried to get him to save himself from his fate on the cross. Even one of the criminals being crucified alongside Jesus tried to goad him into performing a miracle to save himself. But Jesus is not an ambitious king.

The other criminal at Jesus' crucifixion seems to understand. He showed repentance and responsibility for his own wrongdoings and could see that despite Jesus' predicament at that time, he would yet be raised up by God. That is why he asked for Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom, he truly believed Jesus to be the Christ, a king.

So what type of King is Christ? What type of king subjects himself to execution amongst common criminals. And not just death, the most humiliating, painful death the Romans gave to anyone. A death where the condemned would be left for all to see, for a few days in some cases, for all those in the town to see, people who knew the family. There was no way of keeping a crucifixion quiet among the neighbours. The shame must have been unbearable.

What kind of King never tried to dislodge the authorities in order to take charge themselves. Who never had possessions of any worth let alone the best of everything. Who ever heard of a king without an army, a king who showed everyone around him love and compassion and especially concerned himself with those whom society hated. What type of king would, when

faced with death, accept his fate despite encouragement from others to prove himself and save his life?

Well Jesus' kingdom was established beyond his place and time in earthly history, his authority is assured since before the world began and with such confidence and a view beyond his earthly life Jesus was able to be a servant King.

He obeyed God's command to sacrifice himself for us. Jesus understood that he could only fulfil his kingly mission on earth by demonstrating the ultimate powerlessness of the cross and death. By defeating death Jesus displayed his authority. He did not need to take part in political struggling and war, rather his divine kingship came about through obedience to and trust in God.

That criminal crucified with Jesus who recognised him as king showed such faith that day that despite his past deeds Jesus promised him a place in paradise. The man's act of faith in Jesus and repentance of his mis-deeds opened up to him a place in heaven.

Jesus explained to his disciples the true nature of his power time and again in the gospels where he tried in vain to help them to understand how he fits into the world. His recognisable kingly duties of sitting on a throne and passing judgement will occur in heaven and not during his ministry on earth.

This is truly where Christ the king reigns, in heaven and in the hearts of those who believe. By following Jesus' example and recognising him as our king we, too, have everything to gain. So as we give thanks for a year gone by and look forward to a new Christian year ahead we do so with the knowledge that Christ is in his place of authority, yet he remains a servant king, caring about and listening to our concerns and inspiring us to be servants to one another, it is on our track record in this that we are told we will be judged. And with this in mind, when we pray, ask what that criminal asked, "Jesus, remember me now you have come into your kingdom."