

## **Christ the King**

21 November 2021

### **Welcome**

We think we live in changing times and I suppose we do. A hundred years ago, things were even more dramatic. As a result of WWI, great empires had crashed: the Romanov, Ottoman, Hohenzollern and Habsburg empires all disintegrated. The Bolsheviks had taken power in Russia while western Europe saw the rise of nationalism in the form of fascism and increasing secularisation triggered by the tragedy of the war. Inflation such as we could never imagine took hold in Germany. There was more to come: the great crash of 1929 and the grim rise of antisemitism and all that followed. Such was the context for the new feast of Christ the King, established by Pope Pius XI in 1925, not quite a hundred years ago.

### **Topic**

The gesture was timely and can still speak to us today.

### **Steps**

Pius XI wanted to remind people that in the midst of destruction, tragedy, radical instability and despair, there is an utterly stable point of reference and a very different set of values to guide us: the person of Jesus and the visionary values of the Sermon on the Mount. In the words of Pius XI,

The faithful, moreover, by meditating upon these truths, will gain much strength and courage, enabling them to form their lives after the true Christian ideal.

Originally, it was a purely Catholic feast but now it is celebrated across the traditions. Christ the King is celebrated in the Church of Ireland, so in the Anglican Church, but also in the Methodist, Presbyterian, Moravian, Nazarene, Reformed and in the various United Protestant Churches. Pius XI could never have imagined such an expansion but it does show that the feast of Christ the King, with special prayers and readings, has indeed touched people.

What does it mean to say Christ is king? The historical Jesus was obviously not a king. On the contrary, Jesus was a manual labourer, a sometimes popular itinerant preacher who proclaimed the Kingdom of God and who, as a result, was put to death by the imperial power of the day, the Romans. To proclaim him as king is a paradox until we penetrate the deeper meaning.

The paradox can be observed in today's Gospel reading. In the drama of John's Gospel, Jesus and Pilate hold a conversation about the nature of power. Jesus speaks indirectly, hinting at things, and Pilate is struggling to keep up. For us, as readers of John's Gospel, it is however abundantly clear that Christ is king because he loves and, in a very strong paradox, because he serves us to the point of giving his life. In other words, his kingship is the diametrical opposite of worldly power, domination and autocracy. This is already hinted at in the Mark's Gospel. A few Sundays back we heard Jesus say:

Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become

great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

The very same teaching is found in St Paul, revelling in paradox:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

In other words, at the centre of the Christian proclamation stand the belief that God, the mysterious, almighty sustainer of all, has chosen to express his power as loving service, concretely and materially in the love and service of Jesus, the manual labourer, the prophet from Nazareth, the son of Man, the Son of God.

Consistent with that vision, Christians then try to live lives of loving service, inverting the values of the world around us. In their album, *Songs of Experience*, U2 offers a set of anti-Beatitudes, beginning like this:

Blessed are the arrogant,  
For theirs is the kingdom of their own company.  
Blessed are the liars, for the truth can be awkward.

Our vision is different: flourishing are the poor in spirit, whose who know their need of God.

### **Conclusion**

The best expression of all this is found in the poem by RS Thomas, called *The Kingdom*.

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

That is exactly what we celebrate today.