

## Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

The Revd Lucy Winkett

20 November 2016 | Christ the King



### Christ the King?

The window – the stained glass window behind me – was put up in this church after the second world war. The designer of the window was a man called Christopher Webb who died 50 years ago this year.

A very quiet man, almost reclusive, did a lot of stained glass after WW2.

Because most of the time when we're here together on a Sunday I am facing you and you are facing east, I think that many of you who come regularly will be more familiar with this window than me. Windows such as this are designed to be aide memoires – to keep telling the stories of Christian faith, to help us remember them, and re tell them.

Christopher Webb is highly regarded by stained glass experts – and I am not going to comment on the artistic quality or not of this window. But one of the features of his work is that he, in the words of one of his interpreters and admirers, was *“unaffected by contemporary fashion”* and that he *“never pursued the reckless thirst for change that characterised the twentieth century”*. Therefore we have a window that depicts essentially the same iconography of medieval portraits of Christ: the king enthroned in heaven over the earthly crucified Jesus. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the horrors of two world wars, theologians began to question and challenge the overarching all-seeing power of God; in order to make sense of the terrible suffering they had witnessed, they couldn't stomach the thought of an omnipotent God on a throne choosing not to intervene. But this window, built perhaps in defiance after the destruction of the church in 1940, insists on this traditional medieval interpretation, placing Jesus's

death underneath the ultimate outcome of the kingly Christ in glory.

You can see why this is: in the decade after the war, a combination of low confidence, distress in Europe, put together with a relief that the war was over may have led our predecessors at this church to say – well we must assert ourselves, show that we are still here, make our voices heard. Even despite all the terrible events of the 1940s, here in the 1950s when this window was designed and put up, we are making a statement that things haven't changed; God is still in his heaven, and we will not be silenced. Just around the corner were the 60s – and this church is a stone's throw from Carnaby Street – but just 6 years earlier in 1954, there is no sign of revolution, but the assertion of a traditional spirituality in the face of huge social change.

I have spent many sermons on this feast day contradicting the image of Christ as a King. From a patriarchal, deferential culture, the static, seated autocratic man has caused damage in the past and with today's Western meritocratic democracies bemusement in the present. Persisting with this pre-modern image today is, say the church's critics, one more example of how irrelevant we are in a world where human kings and queens have either been abolished or reduced to the status of tourist attraction and fund raisers.

But this year I'd like to try not simply to spend the sermon listing the reasons for rejecting or challenging the image, because I kind of think that's obvious. I'd like to try to explore some of the deeper questions it throws up for us, not simply disengage.

Because I suspect that the themes that surround an image of a monarch – themes of allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and certainly a consideration of the exercise of power, are highly relevant in any consideration of our spiritual life. And also because in a year of political turmoil and shock results at the ballot box both in Europe and the United States, I think it's mostly our task to try first to understand some of what is happening.

So let's deal with the politics first. It's a contested public space, but the fact is that all C of E clergy whenever they move to a new church or role swear afresh an oath of allegiance to The Queen and an oath of obedience to the Bishop. Not in everything though – in all things lawful and honest. There is always room for conscientious objection. In an endlessly flexible culture, perhaps it's not very fashionable these days to take oaths – but church is one place where promises kept should be celebrated.

And while I'm not going to rehearse in detail why this is, going backwards by way of the Reformation in England to the Reformation in Europe right back to 4<sup>th</sup> century Constantine, the association of Christianity with the seat of political power has advanced the cause of powerful men in both church and state while posing very considerable problems for everyone else. Because of this close association, it's not surprising that images of heaven look like a human court – with an ecclesiastical civil service of angels and archangels- we're about to sing about them at Christmas – the ones who “all in white shall wait around”. A picture of divine presence that is static, hierarchical, and crucially, stable.

Interestingly although we associate Christianity with the system of government that includes a monarch, even as in the UK a constitutional monarch where Parliament is sovereign, in the Hebrew story, having kings was not something imposed by God – actually God didn't think it was a good idea

– kings were a concession to the people who *longed for a king*.

The prophet Samuel tried to persuade the Hebrew people that kings were a bad idea; Samuel tried to persuade them that trusting in hierarchy was foolish. But in the end, 1 Samuel 8, after quite a lot of discussion, kings are decided on as the way forward, against the advice of God's prophet Samuel.

The problem was that judges and prophets were not proving sufficient system – the sons of Samuel were not turning out to be very good judges – Having spoken against having kings, when the people look like they are going to go for this system, Samuel is asked by God to give them a stern warning – so he does.

### **1 Samuel 8.11-18**

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*He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.'*

The people ignore this warning and reply “No but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us

*and go out before us and fight our battles” 1 Sam 8.19-20*

The desire for strong male leadership reveals a very complex psychological contract that we play out as human beings wherever authority is exercised, whenever we have power over someone else or someone else has power over us. This yearning of the people for a strong man over them, to keep them safe and to fight battles on their behalf – is evident in the Scriptures and in other societies since.

For those of you who work or have worked in a company or a factory or an office or a public institution; what do you want from your leaders? What do you want from your boss? Many times I’ve heard people say that despite themselves, despite their obvious experience, ability, secretly, it’s actually a relief when someone just tells me what to do. It’s a regressive feeling and not one that many of us want to own up to – but sometimes it’s just nice for someone else to take the strain, say how it is and how it’s going to be.

This deep seated desire in human beings for safety, for protection for someone to fight for us, is why I don’t really think that simply de-throning Jesus on a day like this is sufficient. Because de-throning Jesus – that is following his own sense of not wanting to be made a king, not exercising political power like the Zealot party wanted him to, to overthrow the Romans, de-throning him and reminding ourselves that he was an itinerant preacher that never wrote a book or held public office – is all well and good. But we’re not in the sphere of human government here – otherwise we make the same mistake as all those medieval artists who painted heaven as a mirror of a human court on earth.

We are in the realm of spirituality and prayer here; and so a more profound questions must be asked. We mustn’t leave our own desire for kings unexamined – kings

who will keep us safe and fight battles on our behalf.

And so another question might be, in our own lives, where is sovereignty located? What or who is sovereign – what principles are we obedient to? To whom or what do we owe allegiance? Because even if we say we don’t, we always do.

There are a myriad assumptions we live by – that seem in some way unchallengeable. Families, like little city states, also have their unwritten rules that if each member were asked, they would know what they are.

What is sovereign in your life and mine might be to do with security or fear; you might be governed by a fear of conflict, for very good reason, which means you can never really say what you think. You might be governed by a persistent need to assert yourself, to be oppositional in any given situation, or by contrast, always to opt for a quiet life. These are extremes – but the point is that sovereignty, allegiance and obedience are present in our lives whether or not we use that monarchical type language. We can find that we are living life obedient to a fantasy or a dream, or an unshakeable need for approval? In which case, this de-throning of a God of infinite love and generosity simply makes way for another god to take its place: it isn’t enough.

And so it seems that the Hebrew Scriptures, in telling the stories of people’s longing for kings, against the advice of the prophets of God, tells us something about ourselves and causes us to ask ourselves the question daily; to whom or what do I owe allegiance?

It’s only when we’ve acknowledged and to some extent inhabited our desire for kings together with our own allegiances to whatever motivation reigns sovereign in us that we can begin to understand the revolution that Jesus represents.

Because the kind of monarchical power exercised by Jesus in the gospels turns everything we think about kings and

monarchs upside down. If our need to be safe, to have someone to fight for us, is projected onto God – then God simply refuses it in the life of Jesus. The only sovereignty exercised here is the sovereignty of love, the rule of peace. Our gospel today shows us Jesus being crucified outside the city as a criminal. It's perverse and unsettling, the kingly symbols are mocked, the royal colour of purple – which is our colour in church for the next 4 weeks of Advent – is subverted.

This monarch will not keep us safe –far from it- this monarch allows himself to be destroyed by the hubris, fear and violence of politicians enthralled to the crowd. From the vivid picture painted for us in our gospel today by Luke, this monarch embodies for us precarious living, on the edge of failure, held in bonds not of subservience but of love.

The allegiance we might find ourselves promising if we listen truly to this gospel, is an allegiance characterised not by subordination but an allegiance to the relentless love and inexhaustible forgiveness embodied by Christ on the cross.

The first duty of the Hebrew king was to champion the needs of a group known in Hebrew societies as the *anawim*; the poor, those who were outcast, destitute. In a further challenge to convention, Jesus more than championed the *anawim* – he became the *anawim*. A truly compassionate self-emptying that led to the cross.

I have had a number of conversations with some of you in person and by email about the political upheavals of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. Because we are an open church, a public sacred space, I will not make any assumptions about what you think – even if you say what you think strongly, there may be more nuanced

reflective views that go alongside what in politics is inevitably a polarising process of campaigning and electing.

But what I will say is that Christian faith demands that we search for what unites us before we address what divides us; that faith in God doesn't lead us to give up responsibility to an omnipotent King who will make it all better, but on the contrary, will cause us to speak louder and more passionately about the power of love, as we stand not by a throne but by a cross, pointing to the sovereignty not of nation or race or creed or sexuality or gender but the sovereignty of the pursuit of peace and the foundational forgiveness that is our daily calling and commitment.

And so while I can see the impulses that led our predecessors to put up this window after the horrors of the war, my meditation on it is more as a warning; an acknowledgement that in times of turmoil we might want certainty, in times of change we might give in to a regressive need for a strong man who in the words of the people in the Book of Samuel *will keep us safe and fight our battles for us*. But what comes with that is the potential to normalise hatred of the other as we cement an ever narrowing identity based on our need to be supreme as we see the Christian God is untouchably supreme.

This is not the way of the Cross, and as such we have to work relentlessly to dissolve such hatred and desire for supremacy, trusting not in our own strength, because frankly, we're always liable to want to make a King, but in the irreducible strength of fierce and unyielding love: the same fierce and unyielding love that took Christ to the cross as the incarnation of the invisible God.

And so, on we go. Amen.

Lucy Winkett