

CHRIST THE KING 2018

What's in a name? Well today, you have a choice of three. Firstly, this is the Sunday next before Advent, the final Sunday in the church's year. Since Victorian times, it's been dubbed Stir Up Sunday, based on the words of the Book of Common Prayer collect and has become associated with the day people begin to make their Christmas puddings. This could prove particularly apt this year as the supplier from whom we've bought our St James's Christmas puddings for the last few years has gone into liquidation and so you may well have to make your own. We'll be praying the modern version of the 'stir up prayer' today after communion.

The third name for today is the most recent, the Feast of Christ the King, introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a day to "give public honour and obedience to Christ." Christ the King. It was in many ways a product of its time, soon after the First World War and the advent of dictators like Mussolini. It was only in 1970 that it was moved from October to the last Sunday of the liturgical year. I suspect for many here, some of the ideas and imagery - especially those of patriarchal power - which the Feast of Christ the King suggests are not popular. If that's you, then take heart in recognising the context in which we observe this day - in a church with a woman rector, serving under a woman bishop in a country with a woman prime minister and a woman monarch, who is also the Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

It's also important to recognise the context of the Bible readings we've heard today - firstly from the mystical writings of the Book of Revelation, describing an apocalyptic vision, and from John's Gospel a passage we more commonly associate with Holy Week, telling of the conversation between Jesus and Pilate following Jesus' arrest. Both were written during times when the early church was under threat and Christians were facing persecution because of their allegiance to Christ.

We also need to remember what it was that made Christ so different from the models of power and authority that had gone before. Christ came to show and embody the height and length and depth and breadth and the truth of God's love. Not only did he challenge the authorities of his time - the occupying forces and the religious authorities, but he also challenged the preconception and expectations of his followers, who despite his teachings, still believed that he would take control and rise to power in Jerusalem, not be lifted up and killed on a cross. Not even the act of Jesus washing their feet could prepare them for what was to come. Christ came to model a very different kind of kingship: a king whose triumphant entry into the city, the seat of power, was mounted on a donkey, a humble beast of burden.

The kingship Jesus modelled was rooted in love and service. Jesus gave of himself throughout his ministry, seeking out and coming alongside those in greatest need - the vulnerable, the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the broken. Throughout his extensive travels - all of which were on foot - he was dependent on the hospitality of others, and in

all his teaching and healing and miracles, pointed people to God and to the basilea - a kingdom not of this world.

It is a model of kingship far beyond the grasp of Pilate, who understands power and authority only in the threat it poses to the emperor, and of course, to Pilate own ability to control Jerusalem. Pilate is baffled by the way in which Jesus refuses to confirm that he is a king and yet speaks freely of his kingdom. He also fails grasp what Jesus tries to explain to him, the nature of this kingship, which Rowan Williams helpfully identifies as “the kind of power that cannot (not should not, but *cannot*) be defended by violence.”

The lectionary, inexplicably, cuts the last line and verse of this exchange, when Pilate asks Jesus: “What is truth?” It’s a question which reverberates in our complex world today – a world of so called fake news, of deliberate dis- and misinformation, of hi-tech espionage and cyber crime, of conspiracies and cover-ups, and increasingly, of blatant lies from people in power. Disturbingly, this surreal state of affairs seems to be the new normal, bringing into sharp relief the vital need for the reign of Christ, the kingdom of God.

As we turn our thoughts to Advent, the church’s period of preparation to celebrate the Incarnation, we are reminded of how the language of kingship features in the stories of the advent and birth of Christ – the infant, newborn king, lying in a manger. We also make the link that another ruler fearful of any threat to his power, King Herod, asks the magi to search diligently for ‘the child who has been born King of the Jews’ – that title is applied to Jesus in birth as in death. This is indeed kingship, but not as the world has ever known it before. As we are reminded in our first reading, this supreme power – that of love – is eternal, born of and embodied in the truth of the One who is love, the One who was and is and is to come.

This Advent we will be offering the opportunity to take time out each day to reflect upon that love, to contemplate that kingdom, to live in that truth, to tune in to God’s invitation to glimpse and be part of the basilea. In your service sheets you’ll see there’s a timetable for daily sessions of contemplative space here in church. If you’re unable to join us, or unable to join us as often as you’d like, then you can still take part using the booklet of prayers and readings available on the table in the prayer corner.

Advent is a season that so often seems at odds with the world in the city outside, where Christmas has already arrived, the lights and decorations and window displays are in full force and festive music is playing in every shop and store. I often feel that Advent is one of the most counter-cultural seasons, when as the people of God we take and make the time to wait and contemplate, to reflect upon our lives and the life of the world, to acknowledge the suffering we see, the conflicts and situations which trouble and pain us, and to draw close to the heartbeat of God and recognise our own complicity and limitations and need. We’re offering the time and space in which to acknowledge the darkness and wait for the light and to anticipate the coming of the Kingdom so powerfully described by Welsh poet and priest, R S Thomas with whose poem I end:

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 will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Amen.

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